

# Dealing With Shame

## Introduction

**“And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” (Gen.2:25)**

God created man good, in fact “very good”, in his image. (Gen.1:21-31) Adam was perfectly safe around God because he was like him. He could walk naked before all creation. Everything that could be known about this man and his wife were on **full display** and they were **unafraid**. Adam and Eve walked freely around the beautiful lush garden that God created for them; they talked with God, interacted with each other with total comfort and intimacy, untainted by shame. There was nothing to hide. It was a very brief time in the history of mankind, that there was no shame.

Gen.3, is the record of their sin and the immediate consequences:

*“Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they knew they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife **hid themselves** from the presence of the Lord. (Gen. 3:7-8)*

God called to the man and said *“Where are you?”*; And he said, *“I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself.”* By asking questions, God gave Adam and Eve an opportunity to confess their guilt. But instead they evaded the questions and minimized their sin.

Why did Adam say he was afraid because he was naked? Why didn't he say he was afraid because he disobeyed God? Physical nakedness was indicating a deeper spiritual nakedness; they were exposed before God's eyes and they suddenly felt the humiliation of being naked, and were painfully aware of his **all-knowing gaze**. This gaze went deeper than just the physical, it penetrated to their soul. Shame even changed the way they saw each other and they desperately sought measures to hide from this new and painful awareness. Man will always invent new kinds of fig leaves to cover his shame. The list is not exhaustive.

What took place after they sinned was a real experience. Objectively, they were guilty and subjectively felt guilty. Also they didn't just feel shame, they were

shamed; they actually were separated from God; they **were** outcasts; they **were rejected**, they were physically as well as **spiritually** naked and **unacceptable** in God's sight. (We experience shame when we have been **exposed** in some way and have been found **deficient**.) They needed real covering for their nakedness; and God mercifully provided that covering. A sacrificial animal died so the skins could be used for a covering. Blood was shed. Their sin was **covered**, as evidenced by the clothes God provided. But the gospel promises something even better than a covering for our sin; it promises complete removal of shame.

Being descendants of Adam, we all are born with shame. When Adam fell, we fell because he was our head. The problem of shame is universal among men. As transgressions pile up, our dishonor grows day by day. Not only does our own sin bring shame, but being sinned against by others causes intensity of shame, depending on the proximity of that person.

The closer the person is the more intense the humiliation is felt. We'll look at some common examples of this, but first:

## 1. What is shame?

(From Ed Welch book, "Shame Interrupted, How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection)

"Shame is that deep awkward sense that you are **unacceptable** because of something you did, something done to you, or something associated with you. You feel **exposed** and **humiliated**."

He goes on to elaborate: " You are **disgraced** because you acted less than human, you were treated as if you were less than human, or you were associated with something less than human, and there are **witnesses**."

Many words and images can be used to fill out the meaning of shame:

Unworthy, or worthless, unwanted , unloved, defiled, dishonored, disgraced, unclean, disgusting, filthy, rejected, exposed, weak, failure, contaminated, loser, outcast, repulsive, loathed, vile.

We also have the record of God establishing marriage in Gen.2:24,

*“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother, and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”*

God ordained marriage, a “one flesh relationship” to be the only safe context for people to be naked and free from shame and embarrassment. God blesses sexuality in the context of marriage.

As far as God is concerned, the marriage bed is holy and undefiled. Because of the unique closeness of this relationship, any sins especially of a sexual nature, cause deep humiliating pain that goes right to the bones.

## 2. What does shame look like?

**Shame is the humiliation that says, “I have been seen and have been found unacceptable.”**

All through scripture we see a pattern of nakedness associated with shame. It started in Genesis 3 with Adam and Eve; then in Gen.9:20-25 we read the account of Noah getting drunk and *“Ham saw the **nakedness** of his father and told his two brothers outside.”*

Apparently Noah was humiliated and ended up cursing Ham’s son, Canaan.

In Leviticus the word “**nakedness**” occurs 32 times; and always in the context of some sinful behavior (often sexual in nature) that causes shame in individuals. When God calls something an “abomination” and “perversion” he is talking about the most heinous sins that make people “**Unclean**”. To be unclean, you had to be put out of the camp or executed depending on the offense. The Israelites had to learn the difference between clean and unclean, holy and common. God wanted his people to understand they were to be different from the surrounding pagan nations. If they failed by turning away from complete trust in God, and started trusting in pagan idols, and pagan nations for help, God likened that to spiritual adultery and unfaithfulness. Pretty graphic words are used to describe God’s perspective and just reading it makes one uneasy.

In Deuteronomy 28, God spells out the curses that would befall his people if they went astray from his commands and followed the pagan nations in worship and idolatry.

In v.47 it says,

*“Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your*

*enemies whom the Lord will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in **nakedness**, and lacking everything.*

When God judged a nation for its unfaithfulness, he used figurative language to convey the humiliation he would bring when the nation was conquered.

Nahum 3:5 *“Behold I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; I will make nations look at your **nakedness** and kingdoms at your **shame**.*

In 2Sam.13 we read the account of Amnon raping his sister Tamar. In v.12 She answered, *“No my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this outrageous thing. As for me, where could I carry my **shame**?”* V19, *And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore. And she laid her hand on her forehead went away crying aloud as she went.* v.20, *So Tamar lived a desolate woman in her brother Absalom’s house.*

In the area of sexual assault, abuse, molestation, the level of shame is immeasurable. The humiliation goes so deep it almost never is removed. There are numerous examples of how a **sinful touch** can cause extreme humiliation; like when a child or anyone is touched inappropriately. Even a young child knows instinctively that touching her in private places is wrong but she don’t know how to process it and make sense of it. But the shame from that experience stays with her.

A few years ago I was counseling a woman who came for “severe anxiety”. Her story was that her only son, whom she adored and basically made a trophy of, had done something shameful. She could not tell me what it was. He was an only child, a high achiever, did well in school, was raised in a Christian home. She was so proud of him (or maybe she was proud of her mothering). When he let her down by shaming the family she fell apart. Here is an example of how shame can **expose an idol in the heart**. Something you put your hope in has let you down. The resultant emotional toll is revealing something. Sometimes God intends to use shame to fuel our change for good.

Nowadays we hear of bullying on social media, or in schools. When children or teens are the object of bullying it causes intense pain and humiliation and feelings of rejection by their peers. We hear about young people taking their own lives because the shame is so unbearable. Sometimes a child hear’s abusive

name-calling by their parents; words like “You’ll never measure up; or you are so stupid, or you are a disgrace to this family.”

A romantic break-up in young people can cause excruciating **rejection** and soul-numbing pain. I remember counseling a young woman whose boyfriend broke up with her, she impulsively tried to commit suicide.

Going through an unwanted divorce, especially if there has been infidelity, causes shame and deep pain. Even before the separation, caustic words fly in both directions, betrayal is exposed, you feel worthless, rejected.

The list of possibilities is endless.

### 3. What shame does

Shame tends to hang around, even long after coming to faith in Christ. Most **Christians** understand at least intellectually, the doctrine of justification. When God brings a person to the place of faith in Jesus Christ and repentance from sin, the record of sin is wiped clean and they are counted righteous in the sight of God from now on. Guilt is atoned for; their sins have been paid in full.

But guilt’s cousin shame seems to hang on. There is a gospel disconnect. Sometimes Christians who have asked forgiveness still have an overwhelming sense of shame. Often there is a lingering sense of regret- sorrow that our testimony has been damaged. This is not unhealthy. We should feel the weight of how sin has affected others and has affected our usefulness to God in the moment.. That sense of sorrow will be a strong motivator in the future should we be tempted to sin again.

In an article by James Coffield, who lectures at Reformed Theological Seminary, he tells the story of a young man named Luke. Luke committed suicide after a long battle with addiction and shame. In Luke’s case, although he was brought up in a Christian home, professed faith in Christ, he lost all hope. He didn’t fully grasp the truth of the **gospel of grace that replaces his shame-based identity with an identity in Christ.**

**A partial list of things shame does:**

The person will focus on **self; so he can't serve God or others.**  
**He isolates himself** and blame others for his situation.

He may be **despairing** because his own view of himself has been shattered. He thought he was better than this and can't stand the thought that he is so **deficient**. The wounded pride needs to be identified, confessed and forsaken.

Shame creates a relational style of **avoidance**; they want to avoid being found out; and having the darkest places of their life discovered.

Shame is made manifest by isolation, self-protection, **self-hatred, self - destruction**, or self-preservation at all costs, and an illusion of **control**.

In spite of Luke's popularity and friends, he created a world that **did not know him**, a world of isolation. Shame has a way of distancing us from others, especially those who are healthy.

They avoid vulnerability and move toward cynicism in their relationships. Their relationships are often shallow, broken, and focused on external common behaviors (like gaming, cars, fishing, etc.) as opposed to shared emotional experiences.

If one feels they are about to be "found out" they are gripped by **fear**. They are always scanning and assessing the environment for any signs of potential **exposure**. As isolation and self -protection increase, positive relationships decrease. The absence of encouraging influences propels growing **self-hatred**.

Shame-based people will rage at themselves and be offended at the thought of grace. One may make a mistake or fail at some minor project and say "I am so stupid!" They live in a state of ambiguity, having both an odd sense of **entitlement** and a feeling of **unworthiness**.

They often demand a **great deal of attention** but at the same time feel unworthy of it. They find it very difficult to ask for help. Even though it appears they have "**low self-esteem**", the problem is actually **pride**.

In secular therapy the focus is on encouraging self-actualization and self-affirmation. This fuels pride and makes the problem worse because down deep the person realizes he is only lying to himself.

Shame correlates with self-destructive behaviors: addictions, cutting, soul-numbing behaviors (online gaming for hours).

The amount of energy required to hide the growing struggle is immense. It is impossible to become other-focused or God-focused. Anxiety increases as well as depression. The shame-based person has the illusion of control; “If the problem is me, I can fix it. I don’t need to be dependent on God or others, ever again.”

**Anger:** There are numerous reasons a person is characterized by anger

A person struggling with shame will be on the defensive. Any attempt to uncover their hidden sins in order to help them may result in an angry lashing out. This is his only defense mechanism. Like an animal caught in a trap, he is so fearful he will snarl at you even as you are trying to free him from his predicament.

In counseling couples where there has been infidelity, the level of shame is like a tsunami. Betrayal is at the top of the list of experiences (along with sexual abuse of any kind) that causes intense humiliation both for the offender and the betrayed spouse.

Sinful **anger** is common. If they remain together, the process of reconciliation is long and difficult. Underneath the anger in the betrayed spouse is an immense desire to never, ever be betrayed again. On the surface it appears to be trust issues but the desire to never be humiliated and go through that awful pain again **rules** the heart. When an idolatrous desire rules the heart, anger is inevitable, as James 4:1-3 teaches us.

*“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”*

God never promised you would not suffer in this life. In fact, he tells us in Jn. 16:33 *“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart I have overcome the world.”*

What this person really needs is to understand that **shame** will never go away through **human efforts** and forcing someone else to change so that you feel safe. It takes a powerful work of the Holy Spirit, to cleanse and heal the broken heart.

**Fear of man:** In Ed Welch book, “When People are Big and God is Small”

He explains that when people crave the acceptance and affirmation of others, they end up in a trap. No person is worthy of our ultimate hope and trust because we are all untrustworthy sinners. Instead of trusting God, we tend to look to people for approval. Some people spend their whole lives looking for approval from people;

Prov.29:25 says, *“Fear of man lays a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord is safe.”*

The bible cautions us you can’t please people and please God at the same time. Gal.1:10 says, *For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man I would not be a servant of Christ.”*

As Ed Welch explains, the answer to the fear of man is to grow in the fear of God. And this book is an excellent resource to help us do that.

**Anxiety:** When a family member commits a serious sin, the shame falls on those close to him. For example, If your teenage son got in trouble from bringing drugs to school, he would get suspended, and probably get in trouble with the authorities. The parents are shamed and don’t want to face their friends and even people at church. People go to extreme lengths to conceal the situation. They avoid going to counseling unless its with someone that knows nothing of their situation. People don’t even want their own pastor to know. They’d rather go somewhere nobody knows them. This hiding only creates more stress, because it takes a lot of energy and planning to keep things **hidden**.

**Perfectionism:** The thinking may go like this; “I’ll compensate for past shameful behavior, or being sinned against, by excelling in certain areas I can control. This often results in eating disorders, cutting, obsessive behavior like cleaning and being exceptionally organized. Focusing on outward appearances, trying to look good to receive compliments. The painful feeling of **not measuring up** has to be overcome by endless attempts to look good in front of others.

By the time they come for counseling, life has gotten too difficult to manage. They may be depressed, hopeless, despairing that anyone can understand or help.



## 4. The remedy for shame

Satan wants our shame to drive us away from God and into the bushes. He also would like to use our shame to keep us in chains so we cannot serve Christ. God wants our shame to drive us to himself for **covering and cleansing**. **The weight of shame is too heavy for us to bare. We were never meant to carry that load. Someone else bore the load for us. That brings us to the remedy.**

**1. Get the gospel right.** First, from the moment Jesus took on the form of a servant, he embraced the shame of humiliation; scandal and shame filled his days. Conceived out of wedlock, judged insane by his family, and despised by the authorities, Jesus was familiar with the whispers, looks and shouts of shame. His death was a shame filled experience more extreme than anything we could ever experience. Isaiah 53 describes the horror of how he was treated in most inhumane ways possible. Jesus himself was the most offended by our sins, yet **he** initiated the healing of our broken relationship with him. He **chose** to endure the shame of the cross in order to show us he really does understand. He really did feel what we feel, and experienced all the consequences of our sins. He identifies with us so we can identify with Him. **We are never alone in our shame.**

But real comfort comes when we really **believe** he absorbed our shame on the cross and in cleansing us from all defilement of sin, we are made clean and holy in his sight. Our righteous standing before God includes garments fit for a wedding. When we are clothed in his righteous garments, the clothes don't just "go over" the old filthy rags. The rags are gone and we are new and clean, actually gloriously arrayed.

2Cor.5:21 says, *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*

As you counsel yourself or others who may be struggling with shame, look to the gospels and pay attention to how **Jesus interacts with sinners**.

The story in John 4 of the Samaritan woman at the well is full of hope for those who have to hide their past and live in isolation. Jesus dealt with her gently. He did talk about her sin, and she realized he already knew everything about her, but most of the conversation was about himself and why he came. He did not try to shame her. He came to relieve her of her shame. When that

happened she ran to town and told everyone what had happened. Already her life of isolation was ending.

A vivid picture of shame was the lepers who had to live outside the camp; they had to call out “unclean, unclean” to warn passers-by. They were forced to live away from family, the community of faith, and were considered the “**untouchables**”. If anyone did touch them by accident, that person became “unclean”.

So what does Jesus do? He makes a beeline for the untouchables, the outcasts.

*In Matt.8 a leper came to Jesus and said, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean” And Jesus stretched out his hand and **touched** him, saying “I will, be clean.” And the leprosy was cleansed. It appears that the only requirement for him to be healed (and forgiven of his sins), was a simple act of faith, asking Jesus to do what no one else could do, not even himself.*

Many accounts in the gospels tell of Jesus healing the blind, lame, mute, crippled. In Matt.9, is the story of the woman with a bleeding disorder for 12 years. Although the crowds were pressing in on Jesus, when this woman reached out to **touch** him, Jesus knew **power** had gone out and she was healed. Because her condition relegated her to the classification of “unclean” and “untouchable”, Jesus publicly called her to come forward and declared she was healed. And he also declared she was spiritually healed by saying “*Take heart daughter, your faith has made you well.*”

The **touch of Jesus** is healing and cleansing. It is way more powerful than even the touch of a human who wants to comfort and has no ulterior motives.

When a person is justified by faith in Christ, past sins are totally forgiven, you are cleansed and made holy. But we still sin, and need to confess those sins; *1Jn. 1:9 “if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to **cleanse** us from all unrighteousness.”*

**2.** If shame is because of the sins of other people against us, we humbly plead with God to help us forgive them as we have been forgiven. Did you ever wonder why God chooses for some people that he dearly loves, to be painfully sinned against? (Prime example is his dearly beloved son, Jesus, as he experiences the judgment and wrath of God the Father).

God ordains that others of his dearly loved sons and daughters will be sinned against. His plan is to **glorify himself** through them. (Example, Joseph in Genesis)

Once you are made “whole” and “clean” and “holy” because of your relationship with Christ, no person can take that away. **They can’t touch your soul.** We have to remember that holiness is more powerful than shame.

### **3. Learn how to lament using the Psalms as a guide:**

Turn to God and cry out to him. Tell him what happened and how you feel. Don’t mince words, be real. He does already know but he wants to hear from you.

Ps.69 is a prayer where David reverently complains to God about his suffering for past wrongs he has done. He prays that his sins would not cause other faithful Israelites to be put to shame through him.

(We all know of examples where a prominent person in the community of faith commits a serious sin and causes damage the reputation of God and his faithful people.)

He also tells God his anguish due to his enemies’ sinful treatment:

Ps.69:17 *“Hide not your face from your servant, for I am in distress, make haste to answer me. Draw near to my soul, redeem me; ransom me because of my enemies!”*

*You know my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to you. Reproaches have broken my heart so that I am in despair.*

Then the psalmist ends his lament on a note of **faith**:

69:30-33 *“I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. This will please the Lord more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs. When the humble see it they will be glad; you who seek God let your hearts revive. For the Lord hears the needy and does not despise his own people who are prisoners.”*

#### **Ps.71:1-3**

*“In you O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame! In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge, to which I can continually come; you have given the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.”*

**4. Remember** often the promises of God, his character, and the effects of Jesus’ touch (forgiveness).

**5. Learn to wait** on the Lord; he will act when it is time.

**6. Pray for others, especially those who have sinned against you, bringing deep humiliating shame. This is truly possible in the power of the Holy Spirit. God is glorified when we treat people who shame us with dignity and honor, if for no other reason but that they are image bearers of God as we are.**

7. When appropriate, do **practical kindnesses** for them. Wisdom needed as in some cases; it is not wise to be around perpetrators of immoral acts, but you can pray for them.

8. When circumstances occur that trigger shame feelings (and that will happen); remind yourself of truth: you are absolutely accepted in the Lord, clean, holy and no human person can change that, including you.

9. Finally, read Heb.12:1-2 *“Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, **despising the shame**, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

The word “**despise**” means to “think down” or “think against.” In light of the enormous weight of shame that Jesus bore on the cross for our sins, how could he “think little of it”?

Because he was looking forward to the **joy set before him**, of redeeming his people and glorifying his Father; that hope so far outweighed the weight of shame (as enormous as it was), that he considered the shame not worthy of much attention. God wants us to spend very little time thinking about how awful the shame is when someone has wronged us. The focus needs to be on how we can respond in such a way it shows God to others.

We are walking in the footsteps of Jesus on our way to glory. In Phil3:10, Paul states *“That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may **share his sufferings**, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”*

The more we focus on the hope of eternal life with Jesus in glory, the less that shame has a grip on us. It fades as we truly believe Jesus has made us his own and has given his all in order to have us with him and never to feel like an outcast again, fully **clothed** in his righteousness.

