

Shame Put On You

Where does shame come from?

Shame is the painful emotion that arises from an awareness that one has fallen short of some standard, ideal, or goal. Shame often is felt in association with wrongs we have done. After they sinned, Adam and Eve felt shame when “the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked.”¹ Their shame caused them to hide from God and turn on each other. “The feeling of being exposed, once completely foreign, was now the *only* thing they felt.”² The shame our first parents felt was a result of the sin they had done. Once innocent, they were now painfully aware of their brokenness.

This type of shame reminds us of what is true - that we are broken people who have fallen short of God’s standard. This shame ought to lead us to repentance and greater faith in God.

But shame isn’t only brought on by sins we commit. Shame can also be felt when we are sinned against. Although the emotional experiences of both types of shame can be similar, their origins are different. If the first type of shame is brought upon by our own doing, this type of shame is put on us by someone or something else.

This is what Tamar felt after being raped by Amnon in 2 Samuel 13. She asks her half-brother, “As for me, where could I carry my shame?”³ This type of shame, while brought on through no fault of our own, still leaves us feeling exposed, embarrassed, and disgraced. Just like Israelites who came into contact with something unclean became unclean themselves, victims of sin often feel just as broken as if they had committed the sin themselves. Satan uses this type of shame to wrongly place guilt on victims of sin.

If you are reading this, it’s likely something has happened to you that has caused you shame. It could have been a number of things - physical, emotional, or sexual abuse that has left you feeling disgusted with yourself, abandonment that has left you feeling unlovable, betrayal that has left you feeling worthless, or oppression that has left you feeling humiliated. Whatever it was, what happened to you was evil, and it matters.

Our Unhealthy Reactions to Shame Put on Us: Fleeing or Obeying

In the same way we might flee from or obey Godly shame meant to drive us to repentance, we can flee from or obey shame put on us too. For many victims of sin, it can be tempting to do anything we can to ignore the pain we’re experiencing. Perhaps we try to flee from shame put on us by turning to numbing activities to escape the pain. Or maybe we avoid talking about what happened with our community because we can’t bear the thought of having to relive the shameful experience.

¹ Gen. 3:7

² *When People are Big and God is Small* by Ed Welch

³ 2 Sam 13:13

On the other hand, it can be easy to obey shame put on us due to the all-consuming nature of it. Authors Justin and Lindsey Holcomb astutely observe that “shame can be simultaneously self-negating and self-absorbed.”⁴

Shame put on us overwhelms us with feelings of personal inadequacy, disgust, humiliation, and isolation while simultaneously making *us* and *what was done to us* all we can think about. Obeying shame can also look like trying to regain the control taken from us by inflicting self-harm, pursuing dangerous eating habits, binge drinking, or sabotaging relationships. For many of us though, obeying our shame put on us might present in subtler, yet just as sinister ways. You might try to “affirm yourself” out of your shame with platitudes, developing mantras in an attempt to feel better about yourself and what was done to you. Or perhaps you’re obeying shame put on you through overachievement in work or in church. You think, “If I can make myself appear better on the outside, maybe I’ll feel better on the inside!” But this often just adds to our shame as we can never live up to these moral and religious standards.

None of these responses bring about healing. They all seek to only minimize, ignore or escape the pain we’ve experienced.

Jesus’ Touch Takes Away Our Shame

For the person suffering under the shame of something done to them, the Gospel offers much hope. The Gospel doesn’t ignore or minimize the wrongs done to us; it frees us from their control by redeeming our story. In the Law, lepers were considered unclean. They were forced to live outside of society and cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” lest anyone accidentally touch them and become unclean too.⁵ In some ways, shame resulting from sin done to us can feel like this. Shame causes us to hide ourselves and isolate ourselves from others. Even worse, it can cause us to believe untrue things about God, doubting His love and care for us or His power and presence in our lives.

Fast forward to Matthew 8:1-3, a leper kneels before Jesus, and in what may have been with the last ounce of hope he had in him, he says, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” With a touch - a gentle, healing, restorative, honor-giving touch - Jesus responds, “I will; be clean.” Jesus restores honor - the opposite of shame - to disgraced, ashamed people.

As a man, Christ was tempted and persecuted and misunderstood. He endured a brutal and violent death, one that allows him to stand intimately with those who have endured all kinds of shameful things done to them. “The passion of Jesus was a ritual of humiliation.”⁶ But in giving Himself over to public shame in His death, Christ secured for us victory over sin and death.

⁴ *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault* by Justin and Lindsey Holcomb, 89.

⁵ Lev 13:45-46

⁶ *Rid of My Disgrace*, 95.

On Jesus' resurrection victory, Martin Luther writes:

By His resurrection Christ won the victory over law, sin, flesh, world, devil, death, hell, and every evil. And this His victory He donated unto us. These many tyrants and enemies of ours may accuse and frighten us, but they dare not condemn us, for Christ, whom the Father has raised from the dead is our righteousness and our victory.⁷

Shame put on you says the truest thing about you is that you're a victim of sin, and because of that, you're worthless, unlovable, and disgusting. The world tries to remedy shame put on us by offering self-help and cheap grace, but the Gospel goes so much deeper. It doesn't cover up your story or try to make it seem better than it was. The Gospel redeems your story by giving you a new identity and a new hope in Christ. Once unclean, you are now covered completely in the holiness and love of Jesus.

Running Through Our Shame

Instead of running away from shame put on us, the Gospel empowers us to run through our shame by the power of the Spirit and in the presence of community. If you're suffering from shame put on you, there's a few practical steps you can take to begin to run through your shame:

1. *Share with people.*

Don't wait to do this. It can be really scary to share something traumatic with someone else for the first time, but lies about what happened to us are often the most powerful when they're kept in the dark. God is inviting you to step into the light. Find a trusted Christian friend, community group leader, or pastor and ask if you can share what happened to you.

2. *Lament.*

If sharing with someone allows us to acknowledge the bad thing that happened to us, lamenting gives us the space to grieve it. When we're suffering it's easy to want to rush through grief so that we can get back to feeling "normal" again. Sometimes we think because we told someone, we should be over it. But rightfully lamenting something takes intentionality and time.

3. *Find help.*

For some of us, healing from shame put on us may require more intentional and perhaps even professional help. A good place to start if you think this might be you is speaking to a pastor who can counsel you and point you in the direction of further resources if they're needed.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, trans. Theodore Conrad Graebner, 11-12.

4. Trust God.

God delights in healing His people and redeeming their stories. Over and over again in the psalms, the writer praises God for hearing his cries for help and responding in mercy. His goodness stored up for those who fear Him and take refuge in Him is abundant.⁸ Your shame is not the end of the story.

5. Give it time.

On the subject of growth and healing, Pastor Ray Ortlund wrote, “Gospel + safety + time. It’s what everyone needs. *A lot* of Gospel + *a lot* of safety + *a lot* of time.”⁹ You will never get to a place where you feel only good about what happened to you because what happened to you was bad. But by God’s grace, over time you will get quicker and quicker at reminding yourself of what is true and responding in faith and trust. And by God’s grace, one day you *will* stand with God and His people and “the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.”¹⁰

⁸ Psalm 31:19

⁹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ray-ortlund/gospel-safety-time/>

¹⁰ Isaiah 65:17