

Shame Off You



from Hiding to Healing



Denise Pass

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Denise Pass

Abingdon Press
Nashville

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been requested.

ISBN 978-1-5018-6968-6

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18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

You Are Not Alone

My family tells me that, as a little girl, I was fascinated with balloons. I liked them so much that I actually ate one. I will spare you the details of where that balloon went. I wanted to soar like a balloon, to be free. I imagined myself like the balloon, rising above my circumstances, no longer held down in this life. But eating a balloon did not make me float away. It only made me feel sick.

Sometimes we desire to escape, we think we can achieve deliverance on our own. We try to fill the void we feel in our souls with anything to help us rise above our circumstances. Like a solitary balloon floating high into the sky, we try to find space free from condemnation. Filling ourselves with our shame coping mechanisms, we think we are making progress. But it is when the Holy Spirit fills us that we truly find our freedom.

We're only human. It's our weakness—and our strength. Together we'll talk about the mistakes we make and the shame we sometimes feel, and together we'll learn the truth, humility, and grace way of approaching Shame Off You. We might even learn to laugh at ourselves in the midst.

Introduction

What shame fills your balloon? As God reveals areas of shame in our lives in each chapter, let's take a minute to release shame's hold on us. Look for the balloon icon at the end of each chapter and consider the revealed shame you are giving to God. Give it a name and let it go! Then turn to the devotional for more encouragement.

You are not alone. As we begin this journey of kicking shame to the curb, I want to invite you into a family that accepts you—shame and all. You don't have to go it alone. Come explore your new Shame-Off-You life and join the community in a website created just for you at www.shameoffyou.life or hang out with us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/shameoffyou to see what God is doing with the removal of shame in people's lives. You'll find quizzes, tips, and other folks with whom to share victories and failures together—and overcome the cycle and reach of shame in your life.

Part One

Shame's Foundation

CHAPTER ONE

Shame Is Born

A Story of a Girl Who Shrunk Her Shame

Fear not; you will no longer live in shame. Don't be afraid; there is no more disgrace for you. You will no longer remember the shame of your youth and the sorrows of widowhood. —Isaiah 54:4

But healing hurts. To get to the source of our pain, we have to clean the wound, it turns out, with lots of tears—salty ones that sting but begin the cure for our souls when they are offered to our great God and counted by our Lord.

—*Denise*

Pulling my stringy, thinning hair to hide my face, I tried to conceal the fact that I was weeping profusely. Heaving and trying to silence my sobs, I was keenly aware of the gaze of onlookers. Hardly anyone knew me there. I'd felt safe to let down my guard, but to be so broken in front of strangers was not how I wanted my first Sunday at the new church to go. How did I get here? My life felt like a dream,

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or rather like a nightmare. I tried to remain composed, though my world was completely turned upside down and I just could not hide it anymore. And there I was, like a dam breached, unable to control the emotions I had held in for so long. I was rocking and weeping uncontrollably, and the more I tried to suppress it, the worse it got.

I had purposed in my heart that my children and I would show up full of joy, our shattered lives disguised. But there it was. Shame. It followed me everywhere I went and filled my being and my soul. I couldn't escape it. I couldn't hide it. Imprisoned by its grip, I felt boxed in by the opinions and curious stares of others, real or imagined. Why was I in church with five kids and no husband? Why did our vehicle look like it had been pulled from a scrap yard? Why was I weeping... in public?

Many Rivers to Cross, Many Tears to Shed

For two years, I'd been carrying a burden of shame, ever since the night my (then) husband, when confronted, admitted to having sexually abused one of our children, though he did not give it that name. The shock of this revelation consumed my children and me—it did not seem possible. I felt that the elders at the church we attended then wanted me to keep silent and hide the event, to reconcile with my estranged husband in spite of the explicit danger to our beautiful children. What was explained as being one event we would later find out was not. Every Sunday I answered the altar call, weeping, while the church elders seemed to sweep our greatest sorrow underneath the carpet. It was too much to bear: the shame, the awkward stares of pity and judgment, the constant pressure to reconcile, and the deafening silence that spoke volumes.

The night of the offense, I had woken up in the middle of the

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night to write a song. The Lord would often inspire songs in my heart in the wee hours of the morning, so this was a somewhat normal occurrence. But that night was different. As I wrote the song, “Draw Me Near,” I felt a presence of evil enveloping our home. With fear, I penned lyrics of someone’s sorrows and their need to draw near to God. Sometimes when I wrote songs, they were prayers for people I did not know. I thought this must be the case this time, too. Only this time, this song, which spoke of someone’s life being turned upside down, was about to become my story. Two hours later, after I finished writing the song, I went to bed.

The next morning, the sun came through the window and a whisper awoke my soul. “Tell your husband that God says you have something to tell me.” My husband was in the shower, but I felt a pressing need to go ask this question the Lord had placed upon my heart. I walked into the bathroom and said, “The Lord says you have something to tell me.” Silence.

“I’ll tell you later. I’m not going to tell you now.” My heart was heavy. Instinctively I knew something was wrong, but I did not know what. The day of the beginning of the revelation of sexual abuse in our home, the children and I had to bring a bug to the gastroenterologist. (Only my life!) One of my daughters had been ill for most of her life with celiac disease and now we suspected a parasite as well. I had found this massive creature in our washing machine and the doctor told me to bring it in. Next on the agenda that day was to sing at a nursing home with my home educational co-op. The children were to present the gospel through skits and song. But as I was driving to the doctor’s office, the Lord was preparing my heart. Something was wrong. This day would be a defining moment for our family that I could never have imagined. But I guess that is

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how such times occur. We can be lulled into a sense of thinking we are above crises. It always happens to someone else, right? Wrong. So wrong.

As we drove to the nursing home, the Lord whispered to my heart again. “Ask her how she slept last night.” Oh God, no. No. Please no. Not in my family. Choking back the pressure mounting in the back of my throat, I asked one of my daughters, “How did you sleep last night?”

“Not so well. In the middle of the night, Daddy came into my bed and hugged me for a couple of hours.”

Silence. All of the children were in the car. Lord, please help me. I can’t breathe. What has happened? In as normal a voice as I could muster with a van load of children, I said, “That’s strange. We will talk about this later, OK? Are you OK, honey?”

“Yes, mom. Just tired.”

As we arrived at the nursing home, I felt as if I was not there. Numb. How was I going to pull myself together to do this presentation with the children? What was my daughter feeling and going through in that moment? I have never had an out-of-body experience, but this day would have been as close as I have ever been to one. It was as if I was watching myself and I somehow was functioning, going through the motions. Looking at my daughter across the room, I saw myself at a similar age. I had made myself a promise that what I encountered when I was twelve would not happen to her. I had been sexually abused, and I wanted to do everything I could to prevent the same thing from happening to my daughters. I surveyed the room and wondered if I was really awake—if this was really happening. Like the puzzle the little girl at my feet was trying to put together, my heart was broken into pieces

on the floor. I struggled to breathe and wondered how the pieces of our lives would ever fit back together again. Fighting back tears, I tried to hold on to hope that maybe, just maybe, what my daughter said was different from what my heart was telling me.

Heading back home, I went straight to my husband's office. He worked from home and I home educated, so we were both home a lot. "You need to tell me what you did," I said. "God is revealing things to me. What did you do?"

"I will tell you later" was the response. He had work to do and told me he could not talk.

We had a life group (small group) we had been involved with, though we were supposed to try out a new life group that night. I called the wife of our former small group and told her that I believed my husband had done something wrong but that he wouldn't talk with me about it. "Your husband has already called my husband and they are supposed to meet tonight," she said.

Then there was my sweet girl. I needed to talk with her in a way that would not upset her. As she and I spoke, shame silenced her. "What happened last night, honey?" She awkwardly tried to describe what happened. She knew something was wrong but did not know how to talk about it. Later she would tell me that she did not want to tell me for fear that it would break our family apart. I hugged her and told her that everything was going to be all right. God was going to help us.

That day was a busy one—one event after another—and it was just beginning. Arriving at the home of our new small group, I could not hide my tears. The heaviness in my heart sucked any possibility of a smile. I would go back and forth to the bathroom, splash water on my face, and come back out. When my husband arrived, he was

his normal gregarious self. I could not fake it—I’ve never had a good poker face, and surely not that day. Suddenly everyone left the room and it was just the two of us on the couch. I looked over at him and said, “I know what you did, and I know you are going to our old small group to talk with the leader tonight.” Stunned silence. “The Lord is revealing it to me. Just tell me what you did.”

“I will tell you when I get in the car,” he said. I was trying to put the pieces of this horrific puzzle together, but he was avoiding me. I had already made plans to stay with a friend that night.

“The children and I are not going home tonight. We are not
_____ coming home until you tell me everything you have done,” I said, then burst into tears. We never allowed the children to go on sleepovers out of a desire to protect them. The irony that the danger was in my own home was too painful to consider. As we left the home of the new small group, I called him. “OK. You are now in your car. Tell me what you have done.”

Shame threatened to stifle our existence. Shame that such sin was in our camp. Christians.

He laughed. “I’m not going to tell you now.” There are few moments in my life where I have felt the way I did that night. When all you thought you knew, you realize you didn’t. The agony of the revelation that you have been living a lie is too painful to put into words. But that night I knew everything was going to be different. Several hours later, the phone rang. “I need to talk with you. Can you meet?”

“No, I will not meet with you until I know what you have done,”

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I answered. “You can tell me on the phone.” The words that came out of his mouth pierced my soul and were too much for me to take in. I cannot even write them here. Nonsensical and offensive rationalization of what he had done. I never would have imagined words like that coming from someone who had vowed to love and protect me. Never could I have thought such words could come from a father. But they did. And the pain was too much to bear. My girl, my precious sweet daughter, who already had too much to bear with celiac disease, was now burdened with this. Oh, God, why?

She was thirteen years old, and in the midst of other agonizing revelations that would follow, the events of that horrific night would be minimized, adding further trauma. Her father had assumed that she did not understand what was happening or that she was asleep when he came into her bedroom. This heaped further shame on us. And my precious girl? She wasn’t asleep. She pretended to be. She just waited what seemed like an eternity for him to leave. That’s what shame did that night—it silenced a victim who was filled with confusion that someone who claimed to love her would ever do something to harm her. Not her daddy.

The church had counseled my husband to contact social services the next morning to confess. He then left our home. Nothing could have prepared me for the horrors we would encounter in the revelation of sexual abuse, the debilitating recovery from the abuse, the walk through an agonizing divorce, and the family and criminal court processes that would drag out over the next five years. Nothing. Overwhelmed with a sudden flurry of court dates and meetings, I did the best I could to try and comprehend all that was happening. Fear and worry enveloped me. But as my children and I looked to a Christmas alone, for the first time in a long time, oddly, we felt free.

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My husband had been very controlling, and after living in that environment for a long time, we were surprised and even felt a little guilty that there was relief mingled with our intense grief. The excruciating heaviness in our hearts could not be lifted, but there with the biggest sorrow of our lives was this thing we did not expect—freedom. My husband had never allowed us to have a dog. “Let’s go buy a puppy,” I told the kids. They were thrilled. In that moment, we felt a little joy. There was this sweet little puppy. Who was not housebroken. What was I thinking?

Then there was my oldest boy. He had always wanted to play sports, but my husband disapproved—said it was too much like the pursuit of the American dream, too worldly. We needed to stay home. Well, not anymore. I signed my boy up for baseball and myself for the gym. We went to our first movie. We went on field trips together. We got cable in our home. We. Had. Fun. Yes, I probably went off the deep end. OK, I did. But sometimes part of the healing process is exploring new boundaries, and we can go to extremes while we adjust to our new normal. The moments of fun we enjoyed together became a respite and a source of hope in the midst of the most agonizing moments of our lives, but it was temporary. Our new normal was not easy. We were “that” home. You know, the people already on the fringe with home education now had an additional stigma to bear: the father of the home was gone. Rumors about the cause were everywhere in our tight-knit homeschool and church communities. Was he unfaithful? Was I? Had he harmed the children? Were we getting divorced? Our pursuit of finding joy was also admittedly an escape from the constant shame that surrounded us. People would talk with my estranged husband and then be against me. Wherever we went there were reminders. Events. Places. People. All wondering

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what had happened to our family. And then there was the pervasive court process and the reality that my husband did not recognize the gravity of what he had done. We were supposed to just forgive and move on, but my heart and my children's hearts were devastated. I was cast in a negative light for keeping the children from their father. I felt blame for protecting my children. *Shame on me*. The court had imposed supervised visitation. The children did not want to be forced to see their father, and some in the community thought my children's wishes didn't matter.

My children felt the shame deeply. And the original traumatic episode was only the tip of the iceberg. More painful revelations to come would pierce all of our hearts. Shame threatened to stifle our existence. Shame that such sin was in our camp. Christians. There in the midst of our struggle with shame was constant pressure from many different places.

A people pleaser by nature, I felt like such a sinner when I went against the counsel of church leaders. In our multiple meetings, I felt as though I was being instructed about how I should handle our predicament. I was told that I would be in sin to get a divorce since what my husband did was not "adultery" because it was not with an adult. Really? "What about Matthew 5:32?" I asked. "But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery' [ESV]. The word for sexual immorality is *pornea*. That is any and all sexual immorality." They still encouraged me to let my estranged husband come to church with us. Church. The one place we could come and worship God became a place of pressure, too. Oh, and shame, too.

On another occasion, a well-meaning leader pointedly asked me if I thought I could hear God above the leaders hearing from

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God for me. You betcha. Never had I been more grateful to know the truth in God's word than when shamed for thinking for myself. Already in the pit of shame, I was at an all-time low. Evidently, I was not even a good Christian now. *Shame on me*. Who was it that got us into all this mess? My husband. The one who the leaders met with weekly, who the leaders were going to allow to live on the church campus in an RV while he waited for me to reconcile with him. But what about the victims? Did they have a say? Or were they going to be shamed until they acquiesced? What about the sheer terror we felt, knowing that just because someone was caught did not mean we were safe. Did we matter? By the grace of God alone, the Lord strengthened me and enabled me to get out of that church and to make a new life for my children and me. But, even still, I had to struggle through self-righteous pleas trying to shame and condemn us (control us). No words can adequately express the pain of having the tables flipped on you when you are barely making it as a mom experiencing the greatest grief of your life. The pain I felt for my children would serve as strength to fight for them—even if

It is in crying out
to God from our
place of shame
that we obtain
victory.

I was blamed and shamed. Proverbs 31:8 pushed me on: "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed."

I had been building a career as a songwriter and worship leader, so when I received an offer to serve on a worship team from another church, I loaded up my broken children and left my former church. A month after we left, I received a phone call from one of the leaders of the church we had

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left. “We want you to know that you are not in sin to get a divorce.” While I was grateful for that call, I knew God had already released me through His Word from the shame I felt from that church, but the scars were deep. Stepping away from what we knew into a new situation was not easy, but for my children and me, it was once again freedom. The legal drama would continue to inflict damage for several years, but for now, I thought we were safe. I thought we would heal. But healing hurts. To get to the source of our pain, we have to clean the wound, it turns out, with lots of tears—salty ones that sting but begin the cure for our souls when they are offered to our great God and counted by our Lord.

Showing up on that Sunday morning at the new church was a triumph, though it felt so hard. Was I making a mistake? Would we be accepted here, or shamed once again? Silenced and ostracized by my hidden shame, I had felt so bold leaving my former church in the wake of an enormous heartbreaking scandal, but now, I could not compose myself. Shame found me there, too. I couldn’t escape it.

That first day at the new church they had arranged to do cardboard testimonies. One by one, congregants walked across the stage that day, holding out their cardboard signs in a silent declaration of what they were before Christ and on the flip side, what God had done for them after salvation. Their life stories, summarized in a few simple words, were heartrending, their testimonies of God’s grace and power were empowering. And then someone walked across the stage holding out a sign that said Victim of Sexual Abuse on one side and Healed and Restored on the other. Could I dare to hope for recovery from our mess like they seemed to have experienced? Was victory possible? Could God heal my children and me? I believed in

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God. Believed He was all-powerful. But this. It seemed impossible. I did not see the way. As hard as I tried to suppress the tears that were streaming down my face, there was a freedom in finally being able to let it out despite the shame. I did not care anymore. Like the woman reaching for Christ's robe, I was at the end of my proverbial rope. I longed for the healing as shown by that person who had survived sexual abuse and had overcome shame enough to walk across that stage and claim to be healed and restored. I had been victimized by sexual abuse as a child and had healed and moved on, but now, how was I supposed to help my children heal? Could God heal my crushed heart? Could He keep my children's hearts and faith safe? Where was God in all of this?

Giving into uncontrollable weeping that day was a beginning to the healing my heart so desperately needed. Boxing the shame up was not working. Finally stepping out from the shadows of the condemnation that shame placed on me and exposing the deep anguish within was so humbling—and yet so freeing. My deep secret was out. At the other church I felt like I had to have an attitude of strength while I crumbled inside. Here at the new church, I could share my burden, and did, with the pastor. I was out from underneath the control of the other church and my soon-to-be ex-husband. I did not have to pretend to be perfect anymore. I did not have to hold it together anymore. Still, in a heap of sobs, I felt shame compounding with the shame I already felt because I could not control my emotions. I completely gave myself over, anyway, unable to care how pitiful I looked. There I was, a glorious mess over the shame I felt and at the same time committing shame violation number two—crying in public.

Weeping May Last for a Night

What is it about crying that makes us feel shame? We are shamed for being less than perfect, then doubly shamed for crying out for help about it. Sounds like a serious plan of condemnation from the enemy! But what looks like weakness becomes a secret source of strength for those who know and trust in God.

For the record, crying has been given a bad rap. Weeping in cultures all over the world is deemed something to be embarrassed by. Goodness, we even apologize when we do it. Showing emotion is often seen as a sign of weakness, sometimes associated with mental or personality disorders. Add the sting of shame to the feelings of inferiority for just expressing emotions, and the overwhelming humiliation begins to paralyze us and affect our ability to function. Getting to this place of crying out is made even more difficult with the lingering shame for doing so.

Hiding shame
does not heal it; it
makes it multiply.

But there is another type of crying. Set aside the helpless, I'm-so-ashamed crying. Instead, there is a sweet place of brokenness where we cry out and look to God for comfort. And it is in crying out to God from our place of shame that we obtain victory. Admitting our need is not a display of weakness, but a testament of relationship. But it can be so very hard to admit that aching need. God made us for relationship, to know Him intimately. We were not made for independence, but dependence upon our loving God. There is no shame in that. When we cry out to God, He helps us to recognize

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the oppressive presence of shame, so we can rightly deal with this stigmatizing emotion.

In Scripture, Hannah felt the scorn from shame in being childless. She knew all too well the taunts of those around her, especially from a rival wife. She wept at the altar. She was not enough. She could not bear children. And there was nothing she could do about it. This is a classic situation of shame. Circumstances we cannot control, yet we somehow accept the shame as if we earned it. But Hannah had a weapon. She cried out to God—the only One who could truly remove her shame. And God answered. Sometimes we have to wait for the Lord to restore. We may have to walk through shame to be able to appreciate the shame being removed from us. Hannah’s tears were counted that day, and the priest serving in the church saw her too:

Hannah was in deep anguish, crying bitterly as she prayed to the LORD. And she made this vow: “O LORD of Heaven’s Armies, if you will look upon my sorrow and answer my prayer and give me a son, then I will give him back to you. He will be yours for his entire lifetime, and as a sign that he has been dedicated to the LORD, his hair will never be cut.” As she was praying to the LORD, Eli watched her. Seeing her lips moving but hearing no sound, he thought she had been drinking. “Must you come here drunk?” he demanded. “Throw away your wine!” “Oh no, sir!” she replied. “I haven’t been drinking wine or anything stronger. But I am very discouraged, and I was pouring out my heart to the LORD. Don’t think I am a wicked woman! For I have been praying out of great anguish and sorrow.” “In that case,” Eli said, “go in peace! May the God of Israel grant the request you have asked of him.” “Oh, thank you, sir!” she exclaimed. Then she went back and began to eat again, and she was no longer sad. (1 Samuel 1:10-18)

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There is so much to learn from Hannah when we are surrounded by shame. She did not try to fix her situation. She did not try to cover up her shame. She simply went to the only One who could. And she wept before her great God, surrendering to His will. But she also did something astonishing in her prayer—she was not merely looking for the release of shame. She wanted to honor God for His removal of it. She would give her son back to Him. Our shame never really is about us after all. It might feel like it, but we feel shame until we come before God. Like a magnet, shame draws us either nearer to God or propels us away. Hannah knew where her help truly came from. She clung to God and let go of her shame. She also knew that the one who commands armies—El Shaddai—could surely remove shame off her soul. She demonstrated this by leaving her shame there at the altar. She did not carry it anymore.

There are many such altars every Sunday where people have the bravery to come up out of their seat and lay their burdens and shames down. The very public transparent display of my shame on that altar initially hurt so deeply. Like Hannah, I did not hold back. It led to confessing the secrets hidden within, the very thing I never wanted to mention again. There I shared what I had been prevented from sharing before. And instead of finding shame and pressure, I found acceptance and compassion. Somehow, I had thought concealing my shame would make my own unwanted testimony disappear. Surely the scorn and condemnation I felt would someday be removed. But hiding shame does not heal it; it makes it multiply. Shame takes on many forms in our lives and colors our world with guilt and humiliation. Shame screams out “condemnation” to a weary soul too tired to fight the accusation. It tries to define us, but we can rise above shame. Shame impacts us all, but it is how we deal

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with shame that determines the lasting impact shame has on our life.

Shame seems insurmountable and hopeless to us when we listen to it. But that's what shame does. It makes it seem like there is no way out. Trapped within the walls of our own mind, we don't even recognize all the shame we are bound by, but we try to combat this shame through our own devices nonetheless. We might not even be cognizant of our own approaches to deal with shame. Maybe we rationalize it or try to ignore it, but underneath we let shame chip away at our worth. We consider and turn the matter over in our mind a million times, trying to cast off the yoke of shame. Perhaps we allow bitterness to overtake us as we seethe at those who hurt us or who are judging us. Self-made strategies and techniques lack sustaining power to remove an entrenched, invisible force such as shame. Nice anecdotes and willpower cannot extinguish it, either. In all our struggling with shame, could it be that God has a better way to remove shame and that He can even use its presence in our lives for good?

Review and Reflection

Let's Recap

Some of life's greatest sorrows also bring us the greatest shame. Boxed in by our pain, we cannot figure a way out. When I was trying to hide shame or even trying to find ways to temporarily escape it, shame still lingered. If shame is not dealt with biblically, it confines and paralyzes us and keeps us from living the abundant life Christ has for us that is shame-free. It was not until I was willing to fully cry out to God that I began to see deliverance of the shame that crushed my soul.

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Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever felt shame for something you did not cause?
How did you process the shame?
2. Why do we try to hide shame?
3. Can you relate to Hannah in the grief she encountered and shame she felt because she was not able to have what others could?

Name Your Shame—and Let It Go

What is the source of your shame? What is it that you don't even want to utter, lest you feel buried in shame? Sometimes when we are willing to give voice to what is limiting us, we are then able to remove its ability to define us and limit its power in our lives. In each chapter, you will be invited to identify the shame you are feeling. Write it down here and ask God to help you let it go.



DEVOTIONAL

*Disposing of the Shame Arising
from Trauma*

But the LORD GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. —Isaiah 50:7 (ESV)

In the wake of the biggest devastation of my life, our home was placed in foreclosure and my children and I moved to a new home in the boonies. Friends thought we were a part of the witness protection program. Even GPS could not find us—and, in a way, we liked it.

When we go through tragic events, we don't want to have the reality of our situation out in the open. It hurts too much. Fear of going out in public and encountering someone who is aware of our shame makes us want to withdraw even further. The problem is, the enemy targets those who are shocked, hurt, and isolated.

When we allow shame to separate us from others, we give it the power to defeat us. Yet God's GPS never fails. He is our ever-present comfort, bringing healing to the deep places. This is the difference between those who depend on God and those who do not. We have hope in sorrow. Peace in turmoil. Those who hope in themselves or in circumstances have temporal hope that ebbs and flows with life's rollercoaster ride.

Reminders of traumatic events trigger our past pain and try to

Shame Is Born

keep us shackled to our former burdens until we learn to approach those memories biblically.

A Prayer

Lord, thank You for meeting us in the most traumatic places of our lives and for healing us. Heal everyone reading this, dear God. Show them that Your love and grace is enough.

CHAPTER TWO

Shame's Condemnation

Exposing and Escaping the Condemnation of Shame in Our Surrounding Culture

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in
Christ Jesus. —Romans 8:1 (ESV)*

It's the unspoken pains that are often the biggest source of
shame. —*Denise*

Looking around the plane, I felt nauseated from the turbulence and the constant noise as a two-year-old boy kept running up and down the aisle, drinking from everyone's cups. Geez. Somebody ought to get that kid in line. Everyone knows the protocol when a poorly behaved kid is making a bold statement of disobedience in public. Shame the parent. That's right. Look at the parent with disdain, because everyone knows their parenting skills are better. Only no one ever thinks to question the reason behind the behavior. That kid? He was my newly adopted son from Russia. He had never been on a plane before, did not speak our language, and running

up and down the aisle stopped him from banging his head and screaming. Seemed like a good solution to me at the time. We had to navigate carefully how we managed our new son's behavior, and this was no easy task with the inner ear pressure doing its trick to a little one's ears.

Ever had one of those proud mama moments? When your children have brought upon you a huge dose of shame and you want to disappear? This kind of shame

is prideful and focused on self. As a parent I realized that I would be praised when my children were well behaved, but when they weren't, well, let's just say shame knocked loudly on my door. This kind of shame comes from our identity being tied to our position as a parent. But when my identity is as a child of God, then

Addressing shame opens the door for redemption, where hiding shame just causes it to grow.

my occupation as a parent changes to one that cares more about lovingly correcting my child for their good, than for my glory.

We all want to avoid shame, but sometimes shame is a good indicator that we need to examine our hearts. Maybe there is something askew that needs to be addressed. Addressing shame opens the door of possibility for redemption through shame, where hiding shame just causes shame to grow. We can't overcome shame unless we know what we are aiming at. Shame is best defeated when we acknowledge the elephant in the room and address it biblically and lovingly.

Discipline was one of the hardest things I ever had to do as a parent. When a child was caught in a sin, there was a dread in my

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soul. I knew I had to address the disobedience. To not address it would cause their misbehavior to multiply. God is the same way with us. When we sin, shame gets our attention. God is loving when he deals with our sin, and He wants to reveal and eradicate the cause of the shame. Feelings of shame rising from our sinful choices will not just go away, and our hearts can become hardened when we permit shame to go unchecked. Shame was not meant to distance us from God, but to help us draw nearer by responding to conviction and getting rid of the obstacle in our relationship with God. Staying in the fight against sin and shame in our lives leads us to redemption. We don't have to fear shame. We just need to be able to examine it without being put off by it. Just as I sought to raise my children in the Lord and had to use discipline to help my children understand what was right and wrong, God is our parent and uses conviction to draw us back to Himself. Discerning between condemnation and conviction is imperative for us to be able to hear the voice of God when shame calls our name.

Condemnation Versus Conviction

The most essential thing we can pass on to our children is something we also need: to be attentive to the conviction of the Holy Spirit so much so that the voice of our flesh becomes less. Rising above condemnation is hard. But not impossible. It is far easier to combat sin before it leads to condemnation. If we walk around in condemnation after He has already forgiven us, we live defeated lives. If we defeat the shame from our condemnation by submitting to conviction, we overcome shame and live worthy lives. If we are unresponsive to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, we are distracted

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once again and live for pleasure, leading unproductive lives that likely cause shame to grow and hinder an intimate walk with God.

Maybe your moments of shame look a lot different than mine. Still, the same raw emotion of attack on our very personhood cuts to the core. Shame knocks on the door of all of our hearts at one time or another. We just might not readily recognize it, but we feel its condemning presence in one form or another. Discerning between condemnation and conviction is critical to the abundant life Christ accomplished. Our own hearts condemn us and make it difficult to apprehend the grace that God gives us when feeling shame. Even if we have not endured a significant traumatic event causing shame, shame can still be hidden within our lives, undetected because of its constant presence all around us, but leaving its fingerprint on our minds nonetheless.

Condemnation

Condemnation does not take into account the grace or forgiveness of God. Condemnation does not fit a Christian and shame can't reach a forgiven soul. Condemnation is only successful if the one condemned believes shame's lie—that we are unforgivable and that our shame is too high for Christ to cover it. Where condemnation is based on our works, not Christ's, conviction is based on relationship.

Conviction

Learning to hear the voice of God and follow it takes some practice. I remember my children each coming to me at different times, grappling with what God was telling them. Was it the voice of God, or just their flesh? Or was it the accuser, trying to throw them into shame? No one can hear God for another person. Our children

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need to learn to listen to God all on their own. The best preparation for hearing the voice of God is simply getting into God's Word. Establishing habits of seeking God lays the best foundation to be able to recognize the voice of God. We will make mistakes and slip into hyper-spirituality or legalism. It is part of the growth curve. There is no shame in that either. But as we consistently go back to God's Word and ask for wisdom, He promises to give wisdom to all, generously without finding fault.

The Groups We Trust Most Can Be Sources of Condemnation

The pervasiveness of shame makes it something that we all must contend with in one way or another, but we might not readily see the many ways shame manifests itself within our own social groups, in the culture of our families, social relationships, work, or church. We are wired to want acceptance, which is what makes group acceptance so powerful to those with a people-pleasing persona. Maybe you recognize some of these familiar places where shame has been interwoven in your life. But hang on, because help is on the way.

Trauma and the Church

The church is God's agent for recovery to a lost world when life is hard, ministering to people with God's grace and truth and meeting them at their point of spiritual and physical need. A place of refuge that the Holy Spirit uses to convict us of sin and righteousness in our lives so we will draw near to God, the church sometimes has shame lurking in unexpected places. It's the unspoken pains that are often the biggest source of shame. Churches can become a place where

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shame breeds when we silence victims because we cannot mention what is “shameful.” Covering up abuse scandals in churches does not extinguish shame, it makes it flourish. Broken families hide in churches and feel the weight of their status deeply. At the discovery of our new reality, I hoped my church would help me navigate the horrors of our situation. Instead, I felt condemned in my shame as I was called to meetings and felt pressured into reconciliation with my estranged husband, despite the very real danger to my children. My heart was inclined toward reconciliation, but the Spirit warned me that it was not safe. The stigma of our situation was excruciatingly painful and not talking about it made us feel isolated and labeled. I am not suggesting gossip is appropriate, or communicating without discretion, but I felt in the church's desire to encourage reconciliation, the leaders recommended it without knowing the full story.

Exposure brings repentance, but concealment keeps us bound in shame. What begins as trying to provide care for church members can morph into spiritual abuse when leaders step over the boundary line of providing counsel to shaming people with that counsel. The condemnation victims feel grows if they do not follow the counsel of people who mean well but honestly are just not equipped to handle cases of abuse.

Churches can mishandle such cases because of shame; they may want to cover the possibility of such a grievous sin being within the congregation. But churches can overcome the stigma of shame and become a safe place of healing that brings light to traumatic cases of abuse instead of trying to hide them. Even if you have not experienced shame from an abuse scandal, there is another shame that breeds within church walls that needs to be stopped.

Church and “Normal” Shame

You know the drill. The church doors are open. You should be there! And when you get there, you just don't feel like you fit in. And what's that? You are late? Again? And maybe your kid is screaming at the top of his lungs, too. The stares all around you tell you what you are already thinking. You are not a good enough parent. You are a mess. You just can't get your act together. Or maybe someone gossiped about you because they don't like you or the position you hold. Shame upon shame. And this is just scratching the surface. It isn't as if the church is to blame. Its inhabitants are not perfect, after all. But still we try to be so perfect in the church, don't we?

Once we are saved and our outward appearance is cleaned up, we can wrongly turn to religiosity or legalism and attempt to maintain a look of perfection on the outside. We dare not expose the shame of being less than, especially as a Christian. Looking to others for affirmation can become an insidious snare, especially when it plays out at church. Church—a vessel for the grace and accep-

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tance of Christ—can instead be a place of condemnation, when its members forget the forgiveness they were once granted. The irony is that it is in confessing our weaknesses that we find grace and our shame is extinguished. The church has one of the greatest capacities to inflict shame and pain in our lives because we don't expect it from that source. We naively have our rose-tinted

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glasses on, convincing ourselves that because everyone is a Christian at church, we will be unconditionally accepted and loved. This thinking is flawed on many levels.

First, everyone is not necessarily a Christian because they grace the doorway of a church. Christian culture can imitate true Christianity. All of our efforts to be good people are mere religion and fall short of the salvation that was freely given by the grace of God alone. Those who have accepted this free gift of salvation recognize their need to also abide in this grace. But we, too, even while saved, can still be influenced to walk after the flesh.

Second, various maturity levels within church walls affect how the church body relates to one another. Paul addressed the church at Corinth on this important message concerning the maturity of believers:

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? (1 Corinthians 3:1-3 NIV)

Paul was talking to the church, not the world. Walking in the Spirit makes all the difference in the world. The church is composed of sinful people who do not always know how to deal with shame. But we can recognize the maturity level of believers by the fruit in their lives and not receive the shame cast our direction by immature believers.

Third, our expectations can lead us to discouragement. When

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we expect acceptance and don't get it, we revert to shame. Something must be wrong with us. Or maybe the church, meant to be a place of healing, can become a place of pain. The good news is that there is a better way.

I've painted a hard picture of the church here, though truly, I love the church. I love it too much not to speak up for the problems within it. Paul spoke about the same issues thousands of years ago. The church is still beautiful and called to represent Christ to a lost world. When the church rises up and helps brothers and sisters remove the mantle of shame, rather than covering its people with shame, God can use the beautiful bride of Christ to help its members be more like Christ. When our expectations are based in the reality of the spiritual battle all around us, we don't let shame condemn others but make a way for our fellow brothers and sisters to escape it. When we maintain humility by seeing our perpetual need for discipleship, we put ourselves in a place to be a recipient of grace, not shame.

Family

Family, the people God has sovereignly placed in our lives to witness life's crazy turns together, can be the most important vessel to shape the level of shame we encounter as we navigate through condemnation and acceptance. Family is where our real identity is displayed. And family is where shame can be born, or where it dies.

The fabric of our lives is filled with both precious and sorrowful moments; where man's heart is transparently shown—the good, the bad, and the ugly. And when sin is woven into that fabric, shame grows. Shame can be evident in small degrees, everything from those

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blissful moments when your children embarrass you tremendously, or you embarrass them (paybacks). Whether it was children making unpleasant noises or messes in public or exhibiting behavior that caused even grown men to blush, the family is indeed a crucible God uses to shape us and form our character. Family life was never supposed to be neat. But the pressure to have the perfect family can be a massive source of shame for us if we let it be.

Then there is the debilitating shame—from abuse, estrangement, divorce, death—that injures your family and breaks it apart. When our identity is formed in our family, who are we now? Where is our refuge? Shame hisses at us that there is no recovery when tragedy tries to deal a fatal blow to all we knew, but God is in the business of bringing dead things back to life.

We all crave acceptance from others; it is part of the inner desire to be known and celebrated. The family is where we first learn what it means to be known and loved—
or not. It can be one of the most powerful incubators for shame. I saw this play out in the adoption of my son.

One morning in the spring of 2004, I woke up suddenly with a sense that the Lord was speaking to me. My son had been born. Somewhere in the world was a little fella that I was going to adopt and be his mama. Some

called me crazy; I already had four children. I already had a son. So . . . why? Answer: There was a place of pain in me that remembered

When we try to
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to rule us while
we clamber for
success.

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the rejection I felt as a kid, and I longed to bring to another child the acceptance I so remembered wanting. If I could help just one.

We adopted him from Russia, and my precious youngest son joined our family when he was two. Soon—through his behavior and struggle to adapt to a foreign environment—we realized he was exhibiting signs of abuse or neglect at the hands of the only family he knew: the orphanage. Banging his head against the wall and screaming incessantly was our new normal. We worked to help him know that we loved him, but it would be years before we began to see the fruit of our efforts and healing for him. Sometimes we can think we are living the perfect family life only to have it shatter in front of our very eyes. There in the midst of an incredible story of redemption was the unraveling of all I thought I knew—and shame grew.

Maybe it is your family where you encountered shame and maybe you did not recognize it because it was built into your culture. As a little girl, I felt like I had no voice. When I would speak up, I was quickly silenced and felt like my opinion did not matter. This, too, was shame. And this feeling of inferiority was pressed upon me like a label, so hard to remove. If I felt “less than” in the culture of my own home, what would I feel like in the world?

Maybe the place you hoped would be a place of refuge became a place of pain instead. When you wanted comfort, you were silenced in shame. When you sought acceptance, you felt rejection. Maybe there was a culture of sin infiltrating the family unit that was handed down from generation to generation. No one knew how to eradicate it and dared not speak about it or against it. It was shameful to do so. Or maybe it was all you ever knew. Perhaps it was hidden, unspoken because no one recognized the dysfunction, or they were fearful to speak out against it. Shame cripples families because we dare not speak against each other. Families can perpetuate shame in our lives

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instead of setting us free when we don't love the people nearest to us enough to share the truth that sets them free. Keeping shame hidden and enabling others to avoid consequences is not love, after all. But loving one another enough to expose sin in a redemptive manner so repentance and restoration can take place is what makes conviction so beautiful, and the opposite of the fruit of guilt and shame that condemnation brings.

Parents can use shame to coerce their children into obedience, or children can use shame to manipulate their parents by reminding them of their failures, too. We see this played out in grocery stores everywhere, every day. Parents desperate to control their children's behavior try to shame their children into obedience. Children just learn to exist in the shame culture or overthrow it eventually. Correction is a useful tool in the parent/child relationship, but when shame is mingled, the message can wound deeply. Siblings can join the shame cycle they see within the family framework and use shame to control others by using past failures to humiliate or minimize one another by criticizing supposed weaknesses or inferiorities seen in one another. There is a better way.

Families can admit their flaws in a safe place when the Word of God is at the center of the family culture and all recognize their own unique deficiencies. Rather than avoiding topics because of shame, we learn to face them without condemnation and expose the shame in a redeeming way rather than just ridiculing the flaws of the people around us. When we expect to be a flawed people, we embrace grace and let go of shame. There is a beautiful freedom that comes from knowing ourselves and being OK with our imperfections and surrounding ourselves with people who root for us rather than mock us in our weaknesses.

Work

The television show *The Office* was and still is widely popular, likely due to how much people felt they could relate to the dysfunctional behavior—the tedium, the head games, the shame dealt out by bosses and coworkers alike—exhibited in the episodes. I can relate, too. Once when I was working for the Department of Justice many years ago, I inadvertently sent the wrong document from my Wang computer to the head secretary, who, in turn, sent that document out to all the Department of Justice offices across the United States of America. True story. It was supposed to be a funeral announcement. It may as well have been. I had sent my résumé instead. The laughter ringing in those halls lasted for weeks. And I did not need to wear blush for a while, either. For those of you who do not know what a Wang is, I feel no shame for my age. I wrote the book on removing shame, after all.

Maybe the workplace is a place of scorn or shame for you. Coworkers make your vocation a place of misery as you encounter their snide remarks or perhaps even worse: their silence. Snubs and bantering intended to elevate one person over another and politics or power plays are really attempts to use shame to belittle others to promote self. Again, there is a better way.

When we try to get our worth from our work, we give power to our work environment to rule us while we clamber for success. And when our drive for success is dampened by shame from failures or the work culture in general, we can only overcome and persevere by remembering a higher motivation. The motivation for our work cannot come from other people. People are fallible and their ever-changing opinion would have us enslaved to shame. Paul reminded believers just who they were truly working for and why as he spoke

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to the church at Colossae, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23-24 NIV).

When our work and lives are truly focused on serving the Audience of One, we don't fear shame or seek accolades, we want just His glory alone. We don't worry about promotion from man, because our eternal reward lasts much longer, and man's approval or disapproval no longer holds the power it once did.

Relationships

If God who knows everything does not condemn us, why do we? Is there a way out of the shame game that lasts? In all of these scenarios of church, family, and work, shame can be used as a tool to control or harm. In relationships within all of these spaces, shame can manifest itself as manipulation and guilt trips and morph into abuse. We can become so accustomed to the culture of shame in our relationships that we don't see the underlying causes, but we feel its presence nonetheless. People are controlled and controlling others moment by moment with shame. Desperate to cover our flaws, we try to cover or escape our shame. The consequences can be deadly when people feel so shamed they despair of life. But there is another source of shame we might not see so readily.

Condemnation Is a Head Game and We Do It to Ourselves

Ah... the battle of the mind. More battles take place in the mind on a daily basis than we could ever count. It is estimated that we

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have between sixty thousand and seventy thousand thoughts in a given day. How many of those thoughts are focused on some form of shame? Who can tell? It might be as simple as a thought like, *I should have done this or that* or *I should not have eaten that* or *My house is a mess* or *I am a failure* or *No one likes me*, and the list goes on and on. Although the flood of thoughts and ideas is intimidating, we can take captive those thoughts that are shameful. *If we recognize them.*

When the source of shame is our own thoughts, we can ask God to help us recognize the thought patterns that are condemning us so we can begin to do the work of redeeming our mind. Like these:

Self-Worth

Shame has a way of making us feel inferior. We bear a label that hurts too much to wear. Self-worth can then become performance-based as we try to remove our invisible label. We seek to convince our souls that we are enough, based on our achievements. The only problem is, when we fall short of goals of who we think we are supposed to be or what we think we were supposed to have accomplished, our worth takes a nose-dive. There is a better way.

In Christ, our worth could never be based on performance because Christ alone defines our worth. With His blood, He covered every single transgression and communicated to our souls that His love was so great for us that He would die on our behalf. Christ is our worth. We who are in Christ no longer live, so how could shame impact us so greatly? Paul, too, revealed this to the Galatian church that this identity of ours is in Christ alone: “My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

What a liberating truth this is! The pressure's off when we realize that the grace of God reveals our shortcomings not to condemn us but to take us to another level of freedom.

Escaping shame
is not a once-and-
done proposition.

Empowerment

Shame defines us if we let it. The decision is ours. Do we give power to the lies and shame or do we choose to rise above the noise and live by God's power instead? There is a purpose even in shame that God can use to redeem the messes we make. There is a better way.

The onerous power of shame that humiliates us can be turned into the very tool that liberates us. Humility arising from shame related to our own sinful behavior can lead us to repentance when we are empowered by God's love, grace, and truth. False humility from shame others place upon us or from self-imposed shame can be exposed. We can escape shame's clutches when we respond to conviction from the Holy Spirit and are free to admit our shortcomings and let go of labels that just don't stick anymore.

The stigma behind certain words can have shame attached to it. Single parent. Divorce. Sexual abuse. My heart still aches at those words, but not in the same manner it once did. The shame I felt from the misdeeds of another was not the story I had envisioned when I married a Christian and home educated my children, but sin or shame is not a respecter of persons. In an instant, our lives can change drastically when someone brings sin and shame into the picture. But that is not the end of the story. Our all-powerful God has overcome all of our shame. What we think is an end is

Shutting down shame without examination doesn't heal us.

just a beginning with our great God and Redeemer. What I thought was my destruction was His mighty deliverance. Romans offers a promise that we don't deserve, but what a promise it is: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those

who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (8:28 NIV).

Yes, even when we feel forgotten and buried in shame, our God is not going to leave us in that place. Shame, the very thing we despise that seems to limit us all our days, can be used for our good when we humble ourselves and turn back toward God. But the choice is up to us. Condemnation is a powerful tool of the enemy, sometimes wrought at the hands of others and, surprisingly, sometimes by our own. But there is a Deliverer who wants to set us free from this tangled mess of shame. He invites us to examine ourselves and to heed the invitation that conviction brings, while letting go of condemnation's grip.

Shame Dismissed: Using the Biblical Lens

Encircled by men pressing in and yelling at her, ready to hurl stones upon her, the adulteress could only cower in a ball on the earth and wait for her punishment. Fully exposed, perhaps both physically and figuratively, she was completely broken and likely not expecting mercy that day. She did not anticipate that Jesus would first examine those who condemned her.

The response of God, who sees all, was radical:

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They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, "All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust. When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" (John 8:7-10)

God came to take away not just our sin but our shame, too. The adulteress might have felt she deserved her punishment. She might have heaped shame upon herself. But God removed the condemnation from her accusers and her own heart. More than that, God removed His condemnation, too.

Like the adulteress, we can have shame for something we have done in our lives or that was done to us. People might also try to place more shame upon us. But when we invite the Master in and confess our sins before Him, our shame is removed, and our status renewed. We are no longer defined by shame and its many insidious devices. We are defined by our new identity, hidden in Christ (see Colossians 3:1-4). To have our identities "hidden in Christ" is to have them securely tucked away. Even if the world may drag us down and try to redefine who we are, our true identities cannot be changed. They are hidden (locked) in Christ.

I can hear some of you saying, "I wish it could be like that for me." It can, friend. But escaping shame is not a once-and-done proposition. As we explore the many different faces of shame in our lives, we will learn to remove the condemnation shame brings and accept God's gift to us as He takes the shame off you and me.

The Tools for Shame Removal

When we are willing to face our shame and use tools God gives us in His Word, shame no longer has dominion over us. Exposing shame reveals the root of blame. In examining the roots of our shame rather than pretending they do not exist, we can learn how to have shame off of us.

God's Word provides a safe place to examine shame and to learn why it has the effect it does on us. We form habits in relationships and respond without realizing that shame can be operating within our hearts and minds. Learning to see the patterns and presence of shame can help us eradicate it or respond to it in a biblical way, seeing it through a biblical lens.

Proverbs 11:2 tells us that "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom." The typical response to remove shame from us has been steeped in pride. We can be insulted that someone would try to shame us or be embittered by other people's judgment. Our response can be sinful as we try to project onto others the shame someone else or our own soul is directing to us. Shame upon shame. Shame will not disappear with pride.

What if we were to examine shame instead of being put off by it? Using a three-pronged biblical approach for dealing with shame, we can peel the tentacles of shame off our souls and examine the roots behind our shame through the lenses of truth, humility, and grace.

Review and Reflection

Truth

Through truth, we ask God to reveal if there is any truth in the accusation of shame knocking on the door of our minds.

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Shame keeps us in bondage, but the truth sets us free. Yielding our perspective and submitting to truth, we step out of shame and into freedom. At first it is hard to even consider if any of the shame fits. We don't want to acknowledge its presence long enough to discover if there is any truth we need to receive. But shutting down shame without examination doesn't heal us. Maybe there is a component of the shame that we need to own. This does not mean we are defined by shame. Rather, it means when we acknowledge our weakness the shame dissolves as we apply God's truth to the presence of shame in our lives. God removes shame through truth when we are willing to be honest and teachable rather than defensive and prideful. Truth roots out shame: "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (Ephesians 4:15 NIV).

Humility

Through humility, we recognize that we are capable of shameful deeds. We understand that there is nothing good in us except Christ alone: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Colossians 3:12 NIV).

Even when we have determined that the shame does not fit us this time, we are humble enough to pause and consider if it does and thank God and give Him the glory when it doesn't. Keenly aware that we are capable of inviting shame into our lives, we thank God that He has removed it from us.

Grace

Through truth and humility, we ask for and receive the grace of God for what we need to learn from shame and gain the ability to

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filter out and let go of what we don't need. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, and we rejoice that God loves us enough to reveal both counterfeit and legitimate shame. And His grace is sufficient for us. "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9 NIV).

The beautiful thing about recognizing our shame and its ugly roots is also seeing the deliverance of our great God who does not leave us in shame but delivers us from its prison.

Examining the root of shame helps us deal with it biblically to:

- Uncover the shame we have concealed to begin to heal emotionally.
- Discover the hidden shame revealed to begin to deal with it biblically.
- Recover the original honor yielded to begin to feel real freedom.

Let's Recap

Shame is insidious. Whether it's fair or not, we can have shame for something we have done in our lives or that was done to us. The groups we trust most—church, family, coworkers, friends—can be sources of the most hurtful condemnation. Once we feel the sting of condemnation, shame moves into our mind. Shame is a head game, and we do it to ourselves. It affects our feelings of self-worth, our sense of empowerment, and makes us feel isolated. To be set free from shame we must learn to discern between conviction and condemnation and to replace the lie of shame with truth, humility, and grace that we can only get from God.

Shame's Condemnation

Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever felt like the adulteress woman? Surrounded by accusers? What did you feel in that moment?
2. Maybe there was a time when you were not even to blame. What was your response?
3. Why are accusations so powerful?

Name Your Shame—and Let It Go



DEVOTIONAL

Overcoming Shame's Condemnation

I prayed, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God! For our iniquities have climbed higher than our heads, and our guilt extends to the heavens."

—Ezra 9:6 (NET)

Shame is invisible to the eye but palpable to the soul. It sneaks in through a perception we have of ourselves, brought on by other people's opinions (real or imagined), or our own opinion of ourselves based on our behaviors and belief system. Shame can be subtly woven into our daily existence, snuffing out joy, adding anxiety or fear. Shame can cause us to doubt God's goodness, fill our mind with futile thoughts, and wreck our health. It needs to be stopped.

Shame: We are not good enough as is. We are stuck in our shame with no way out. Maybe we are guilty of the shame we feel.

Shame Off You: We were made in the image of God. When we accepted His salvation, it changed us for all eternity.

When we fix our hope on Christ, shame loses its power.

And when we confess our shortcomings before a Holy God, He forgives us completely. Nothing else and no one else can ever condemn us. Ever.

Shame's Condemnation

What shame does is not as important as what God can do when we share our shame with Him. Shame off you, friend. Shame off me, too.

A Prayer

Lord, help me identify the shame in my life and to let it go. May I identify with you alone.

CHAPTER THREE

Shame's Roots

Exposing and Understanding the Real Cause of Shame

Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground." ... Now the man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame.
—Genesis 1:26, 2:25

Worshiping at the throne of acceptance prevents us from pleasing God. —*Denise*

Walking into the room, I surveyed the landscape and looked down, wanting to avoid eye contact. Perhaps it was to avoid being known. If the eyes are a mirror to the soul, maybe someone would look into them and say that I was not enough. These people did not even know me. It was the DMV, for crying out loud. It wasn't a formal dance. But looking in the mirror before entering the

building, I felt less than. My hair was dry and tousled, my makeup was not done. It was just me. In baggy sweatpants. Suddenly aware of my humble presence, I wondered what on earth had made me think it was OK to go out in public looking like this. *I don't know anyone here*, I thought. *It does not matter*. But it did.

This feeling of inferiority? Social anxiety formed in rejection and comparison, manifesting itself as shame. And what was I doing and thinking as I looked around me, as well? Hmmm. I guess I was also defining people's worth and shame quotient by their appearance or behavior. Ouch. How did it come to this? We live in a culture of shame. Our acceptance and confidence are fragile as the roots of shame are felt everywhere. The problem is, we don't often see it as shame, so we misdiagnose our condition and treat the wrong symptoms, hoping we can get rid of that nagging feeling dragging our soul down.

The core root of our shame is formed by a fear of rejection and cultivated by comparison. As long as I can remember, rejection

has played a role in my life. I desperately wanted to measure up to whatever the latest standard was, but never felt I could. And that standard just kept changing, just when I thought I had it figured out. The roots to this rejection were formed from a desire to be known and celebrated and feeling so very marginalized. I was a very shy little girl, the youngest of three with two older brothers I admired so much. They were not afraid to try anything. As they became star athletes, I struggled behind and tried to look athletic while I

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chased after the bats they threw. (Just call me Bat Girl, only I was not a superhero). I wanted to make my family proud, but I did not have the skills others had, so I chose to play the tuba. Nerd alert. Only problem was, the tuba was bigger than I was. The struggle was real as I tried to carry my instrument with all that my four-foot-eleven body could muster. The band director had mercy on me and suggested I try a smaller instrument: the euphonium. And so

At the root of shame is the belief that what we have is not enough.

I did. And I played that thing every day. I had an occupation. A purpose. An identity. Granted, maybe many would not be trying to get the identity of a little girl puffing her cheeks playing a brass instrument, but I finally had something that I could do, and I could do it well.

While my world around me became crazy as my parents divorced, remarried other people, and divorced again, I blew a lot of hot air into that instrument. When birthdays came and went without a birthday call or card from my dad, I took those feelings of rejection and let them fuel my passion for music instead. It wasn't that my dad intended to hurt me. Divorce just shatters families. But my little girl heart took it as rejection. I was not enough. When I was mocked on the school bus and threatened again and again to be beaten up because of the color of my skin (I was the only *gringa* on the school bus), I stuffed the rejection that stifled my joy and poured my pain into the only thing I knew would give me the acceptance I longed for. Only problem was, the empty ache inside was not quelled by music. It was just

pacified temporarily, substituting the shame I felt for being inferior, with the brief, temporary satisfaction of achievement. I was deceived into thinking that I could find what I was looking for in something other than my relationship with God. Even though it seemed good, nothing could satisfy my needs like only God could. The apple does not fall too far from the tree, it seems.

A Deceptive Promise

That apple in Eden must have been mighty good. OK, we are not sure whether it was an apple, but the forbidden fruit was so tempting that it seemed worthy of forsaking all the incredible blessings surrounding Adam and Eve. For what? For knowledge. I personally love learning, but knowledge of evil is something I would rather not know about. God feels the same way. He was not being a spoilsport to say that they could not have that piece of tantalizing fruit. He wanted them to live shame-free. Once they acquired knowledge of good and evil, they would become aware of their shortcomings, and suddenly judgmental comparison and all its shame would enter the world.

I think about Eve being able to be in the buff and not worry about whether her figure was perfectly toned. Pretty sure she did not have make up on, either. But she traded that perfection of shame-free living for an insecure world filled with shame. Of course, the proposition she was offered was not billed that way. It never is. It was couched in a positive light. She and Adam would be like God. But wait a minute, didn't God already say that He had made them in His image? What was this new, more improved version they craved?

This is how we get sucked into lives of shame, too. At the root of shame is the belief that what we have is not enough. Though we might

Shame Off You

not say such a thing, our hearts betray us. Discontentment with who we are or what we have comes from unfulfilled expectations. While we might not think of ourselves as being entitled, there can be a root of entitlement that thinks we deserve more. True contentment is not a natural emotion, after all. The apostle Paul even said he learned the secret of being content:

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:10-13 NIV)

Contentment cannot come from achieving our desire, but in asking Christ to meet us in our place of need, to strengthen us whether we are recipients of favor or rejection. Craving acceptance from man is never satisfied and only breeds shame. A whole room of people can be giving us favor, but the one person who rejects us is the one we remember. Someone did not think we were all that. We can let their opinion and definition of us burden our souls. Our victory over rejection depends on our belief and trust in God over man. At the root of our personhood is the lie that how we were made is somehow deficient. We need something else. Something better. This root of shame shows up in the funniest of places—in the pinnacle moments of life as well as in the trivial or mundane. And we see it in the lives of God's people played out over and over again.

Rejection's Roots

In this fallen world, we yearn for fairness and equality, yet want to be the favored one. Sometimes at the root of our quest for acceptance is a desire to be the most popular. We want admiration, maybe even praise. Pride fuels this desire and can turn the sting of rejection into a monster. Jacob wanted his brother Esau's birthright. He got it, all right. But we do reap what we sow, and the consequences of his envy were played out in his life, too. Though Jacob loved Rachel, he was tricked into marrying Leah and then ultimately had both as wives.

This was not an enviable position for the wives or for Jacob. Leah was not Jacob's favorite, and the sting of her not measuring up to Rachel's status visited her heart and mind every waking moment. It fueled her jealousy, pain, and depression and led to her participation in a battle with her sister for acceptance from Jacob. Leah tried to satiate her desperate pursuit of being the favorite with competition and achievement. She was going to have the most children. She was going to win Jacob's prized favor. But at what cost? The relationship with her sister and her peace of mind. Doubtful that she achieved her objective, Leah's obsession with besting her sister in child-bearing ultimately cost her that sister. And the conflict in that household was intense. Sometimes in the pursuit of favor we lose sight of what really matters most. Sure, it stunk that Leah was given to a man who did not love her. But it was not Rachel's

Performing our
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Shame Off You

fault. It stunk for Rachel, too. She did not want to have to share her husband.

The striving of man can steal our joy unless we accept the portion God has given to us. Instead of wanting someone else's portion, we can ask God to see His purposes that are far beyond our own self-oriented goals. God has placed us uniquely where we are supposed to be in this fallen world. Nothing is out of His control. The thorn in our flesh that plagues us? It is an opportunity to choose joy in the midst just like our Savior did when He carried His cross. When we do not gain favor, perhaps God is calling us elsewhere. Or maybe He is using that rejection to shape our character for another assignment. Worshiping at the throne of acceptance prevents us from pleasing God. Galatians reminds us that pleasing man is not our goal in this life, and seeking that favor above God's causes us to live our lives in vain: "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" (1:10 ESV).

Rejection's Purpose

Rejection speaks over the framework of our little world and limits us according to that definition. We long for favor to relieve us from the heavy burden of someone else's limiting belief about our value or worth. Living with rejection is hard, indeed. If anyone can relate, it is Joseph. His own brothers despised him because of the favor God had given him. Yep. Jealousy. Who can stand before it? No one. Unless God is standing with you. Joseph's brothers really let their jealousy get the better of them, to the point of contemplating Joseph's death. Extreme rejection, for sure. Influenced by their envy, they sold Joseph into slavery and faked his death to hinder old dad

Shame's Roots

from hoping that his favored son was still alive. In the desperate moments of rejection, God's purposes are always greater than any humiliation we may feel.

It isn't that God did not care about the unfair treatment; in fact, when we see the end of the story, we see that God used what Joseph's brothers meant for evil in powerful ways to save His people. But sometimes in the middle of rejection it is hard to see beyond our pain. We don't see any purpose in it whatsoever. When man rejects us, it might just be an assignment from God. Understanding the root of rejection can help to point us to where our acceptance should come from. When we respond to rejection with humility and perseverance, we are accepted in God's sight and God is glorified. We might even see God work in miraculous ways. Being still and trusting the Lord to fight our battles is so very hard when we are used to fighting our own battles or trying to perform to escape rejection's label. Our Savior chose the rejection we want to avoid. As we believe in Him and look to Him for acceptance, our shame is removed.

Rejection's Performance

We try to avoid rejection by being perfect. Performing our way out of the feelings of shame stemming from our very personhood is a flawed solution and another root of shame. Shame is a taskmaster. It commands us to try and fulfill its demands, yet the target is ever-changing. The performance that rendered us shame-free yesterday no longer fulfills the demands of being shame-free tomorrow. And this taskmaster is seemingly invisible, as we give shaming/rejecting power to anyone and everyone when we are a people pleaser at heart. While we work at our performance tiringly, Jesus is calling out to

Shame Off You

our hearts to rest. It's OK that we will never measure up. He accepts us anyway. Still, our flesh longs for those around us to give us the shame-free status. But they never can. The inferiority we feel is not from them after all.

Know Thyself: Rejection's Surprise

Blaming others for their shaming or shunning is never going to give us the confidence and clear conscience we crave. We discover in all our searching for acceptance from others that it really has never been other people's fault. But I can hear you say that it most certainly is. People can be so cruel and can communicate our lack of worth rather clearly and painfully. But we gave them that power. The insecurity from within, cultivated by comparison or a standard we feel we are supposed to ascribe to, is often at the root of our own shame. Peer pressure is not just for the school yard. It is prevalent throughout all of the stages of life as we seek to define ourselves by those around us. But when we know ourselves in light of Scripture, we can silence the voices of peers and ourselves from allowing rejection to limit us.

Taking inventory of our thoughts and behaviors, we can ask God for discernment to understand why we respond to acceptance and rejection the way we do. Rejection need not produce shame if we understand the heart behind the rejection and our response to it. Knowledge behind the motives of our response to shame is more powerful than the shame itself. But understanding alone cannot overcome shame. Applying understanding in our lives by the grace of God and through His Word gives us strength to overcome the shame stemming from rejection.

As we seek to know ourselves, we will more clearly see aspects

that might seem shame-worthy. But we can choose to see ourselves through God's eyes instead of our own. We know our weaknesses not to self-deprecate, but to humble ourselves and to see Christ glorified in our weakness. In our weaknesses, we are strong when we let go of putting confidence in the flesh and put it in Christ instead. When we confess our weaknesses and give them to God, we make room for His power

to be displayed in us and shame falls off of us. Once we have understood the root cause of our shame, we can choose the best route to get rid of these debilitating roots of shame in our lives.

We can be more powerful than shame when we let go of the rejection from man and instead receive Christ's acceptance.

The Route and "Root" of Shame

The typical route of shame works like this: an event (comparison, judgment, rejection, for example) makes us *feel* shame, and we begin to *process* it. We may try to avoid feeling the shame by denying the shame, trying harder (performance) or deflecting the blame until we have layers of shame piled on top of one another. As we hide one shame, we are inviting another shame in. Building shame upon shame, our vision becomes clouded and we struggle to recognize legitimate shame from false shame. We begin to accept it all—the shame wrongly applied to us and the shame we earned all on our own—because we just don't want to have to deal with it.

Shame Off You

Once we are aware of shame in our lives, we begin to process that shame by viewing it through one of two lenses: the condemning lens or the biblical lens.

Condemning Lens

Denial and rationalization

Hiding and guilt

Deeper shame and
condemnation

Biblical Lens

Confession and repentance

Shame Off You!

Restoration

The condemning lens takes us down a path of denial and rationalization as we seek to hide the guilt plaguing our souls and continues to even more shame and condemnation if we continue on that path. But there is another route we can take that begins when we process our shame with truth, humility, and grace. When we examine the shame and confess or repent for our part in it, we remove shame rather than being condemned by it and are restored.

The route we take does not necessarily get to the root of shame. We take the typical, condemning route of shame innocently enough. We might have learned how to process it first by those around us. We learn quickly enough that shame is not something we want. But our coping and dismissal methods are faulty, inherited by fallen people. Rather than trying to understand how we got onto the route of shame in the first place by examining the root of the problem, we would rather quickly and quietly silence its outward expression. But underneath, the root of our shame is bubbling and will eventually surface. Shame might be manifest as sorrow on the outside but on the inside there could be a host of roots contributing to that sorrow: jealousy, unforgiveness, anger, hurt feelings, abuse,

lack of self-worth, doubting God. The list goes on and on. When we try to silence the shame without examining these roots, we continue on the cycle of shame unless somewhere we recognize the real root behind our shame and the dysfunctional patterns we developed to cope with it. A lot of these mechanisms we put into place without realizing it, often arising from childhood, where we responded to shame around us, sometimes in unhealthy ways.

A Healed Daughter

One of the most significant roots of shame in my life came from rejection. I did not realize the profound effect that rejection from father figures played in my life until recently. My father's absence as a by-product of divorce hurt deeply while I was growing up, but it was compounded by the outright rejection from other father figures who persecuted me for my faith and the decision to home educate my children. That rejection ripped me apart.

I understand now that it was a spiritual battle. These father figures did not understand what being born again meant, though years later, one of these men apologized for his behavior and admitted that I was the most authentic believer he had ever encountered. It is a wonderful thing when God brings situations around, but that is not always the case. In the middle of our pain from the rejection of man, God wants to meet our need. He wants to be our Abba Father when our earthly fathers wound us. I desperately wanted a father's affection and found it on my knees, crying and praying to my heavenly Father. Having my needs met in Him first enabled me to accept my earthly fathers as they were.

Lack of acceptance from family is particularly painful. They

Shame Off You

supposedly know us best. But rejection is spiritual, a battle of the soul. It does not really have to do with us at all. People reject others when their flesh dominates their minds. Or sometimes we misunderstand and think we are being rejected when we are not. When we wait on God and trust Him for deliverance, He is always faithful. His timing just might not be ours. We aren't sure when David penned Psalm 27, but the character shaped during the rejection David felt left a lasting impression on him, as well as the ensuing consequences from David's own sin and shame. David waited on His God. And God delivered.

Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me. Teach me your way, LORD; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors. Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations. I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD. (Psalm 27:10-14 NIV).

Rather than striking back with vengeance or permitting bitterness to rob us of the abundant life Christ promises, we can be more powerful than shame when we choose to let go of the rejection from man and receive Christ's acceptance instead.

Who's Got the Power?

Shame is powerful. At the root, we see that shame is potent because it is wielded among so many. But the power one exudes by shaming others reveals one's own weaknesses instead. Insecure

Shame's Roots

people shame others. When we are shamed by an insecure person, we need to recognize that they bear the shame that they are trying to cast upon us. Seeing the truth behind shame helps us to overcome it and use it in a redemptive way. Rather than letting shame turn into resentment, hurt, or bitter feelings, we can powerfully choose to forgive those who shamed us and pray for them. Their shaming does not apply to us unless we let it. When we feel rejected and hated, we are in good company. Our Savior showed us the way. Hated without cause, he patiently relied on God and waited for the Spirit of truth to defend Him: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18-20 ESV).

Review and Reflection

Truth

Finding the cause of our shame does not produce shame, but helps us to extinguish it.

Humility

When we understand the roots of our shame and are willing to expose them, we are not shamed, but healed.

Grace

No matter what the root cause is of our shame, all shame can be healed through our great Savior, the Holy Spirit, prayer, and the Word of God.

Shame Off You

Let's Recap

Understanding the real cause of shame sets us free. Shame is essentially an endless cycle of discontentment and comparison, in which we reject ourselves or are rejected by others when our comparison falls short of the ideal. Examples of this sort of comparison include judgmentalism, fear of rejection, seeking acceptance from others, peer pressure, jealousy, anger, unforgiveness, and insecurity. To avoid feeling the shame, we rationalize, become people pleasers, blame others, or practice avoidance and hiding. However, these are not useful mechanisms. Instead, we should ask God for discernment/understanding, learn our weaknesses, trust God's purposes, and see ourselves, then, through God's eyes.

Reflection Questions

1. What root of shame do you identify with the most? Can you trace its beginning?
2. How will you silence the root of shame in your life?
3. What new roots can you form in your life to counter the habitual roots of shame in your life?

Name Your Shame—and Let It Go



DEVOTION

Shame Off Rejection

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

—1 Peter 5:10 (ESV)

Rejection is one of the most significant roots of shame. But it need not define us if we see it for what it is. This isn't easy; it's far easier to believe the lies rejection tells us: that there is something wrong with us or that we are forever defined by it.

The list of shame by rejection can go on and on. Rejection is a part of life. Acceptance is a part of faith. So let go of others' definition of you and pick up God's instead. Believing that our heavenly Father is good, loving, and accepting sets us free to accept ourselves, too.

Shame stemming from rejection is an indicator that we are trying too hard to perform to earn acceptance that God already gave us. When we just keep standing and let God defend us, our rejection melts away in light of His grace. Just keep doing the next, best, right thing and let the Lord take care of our shame. It doesn't matter what rejection we have experienced in the past. Today is a new day. Walk in the freedom of Christ—shame off us, friends.

A Prayer

Lord, help me fully embrace the acceptance you offer and let go of the rejection this world gives. Set me free from shame and all of its roots, that I may live the abundant life You promise in Your Word.