

HELP!

I FEEL ASHAMED



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INTRODUCTION

Shannon's¹ uncle sexually abused her throughout her childhood. He told her that she was a seductress and that she would be punished if she told anyone. Ashamed, Shannon was silent for years. As she grew older her uncle's cruel ridicule and humiliation crushed her spirit.

Shannon's parents were unaware of the abuse. At one point Shannon tried to tell her mother, who expressed shock and disbelief. She reprimanded Shannon for telling lies that could destroy her uncle's reputation. Nothing was done to protect her, so the abuse continued.

Though Shannon had received the Lord Jesus Christ as her Savior when she was a young child, her mother's reaction shook Shannon's faith in God and caused her to doubt her family's love. During

¹ Shannon and Gwen are fictional characters created from true stories, with some details changed to protect identities.

her teen years, her anger grew into a bitterness and rebellion that were met with condemnation and sharp criticism from her family. Shannon withered and hardened under their disapproval. She married young to escape her home and her uncle, not realizing that her new husband was as troubled as she was. They divorced after a few months, intensifying her family's disapproval. Shannon sought emotional relief by plunging into self-destructive partying and immorality. But nothing satisfied the ache in her soul.

Some years later, Shannon was experiencing panic attacks, failed relationships, angry outbursts, and depression that sometimes required hospitalization. Eventually she remembered her abandoned faith in Christ and decided that it was time for a change: time to return to the Lord.

She joined a doctrinally sound Christ-centered church and there sought counseling to overcome her anger, depression, and fear. The gospel became fresh again as she started to understand that the love and presence of God had protected her soul. She received his forgiveness and learned to trust God more and more. Her uncle had died, but Shannon forgave her mother and asked her parents to forgive her. Gradually her relationship with them began to mend.

Today, Shannon's new church continues to provide her with help through Bible-based teaching, biblical love, godly fellowship, prayer support, and practical living skills. She holds a job with a Christian business-owner and has returned to college. She's now ready to move on with her life.

Shannon's Private Struggle

Shannon knows that she is on the right track now. She experiences periods of peace and enjoyment. Her new friendships are healthy and growing. But she still feels ashamed of her past. Her friends do not know about the abuse or her rebellion, and Shannon fears discovery. "What would they think? How could they want to befriend an awful person like me?"

Doubts cloud her mind. Her fears lead her to analyze every conversation. She mentally flogs people for their insensitivities or degrades herself for her social blunders. Surely people are angry with her! Are they secretly whispering behind her back? Will they turn away, like everyone else? Or, worse, will they turn on her? She cringes and bristles at the thought.

At times her inner battle becomes very intense. When dark thoughts and doubts persist, her

confusion and burden grow heavier, and she wants to withdraw from any kind of relationship. Tidal waves of self-doubt and fear drive her to “safe” harbors of secrecy and defensiveness. She knows her friends are puzzled when she retreats, but she wants to avoid causing any more catastrophes in her life. She condemns herself for struggling with such “stupid feelings,” then she feels ashamed of feeling ashamed. Memories of her family’s accusations and her past sins mercilessly haunt her: “It’s all true! I cannot deny what a failure I have been.” She concludes that people are right to reject her, but her spirit recoils at the thought of their abandonment.

Shannon pleads with God for relief. But she knows it is impossible to undo her shameful past. And in spite of her best efforts, she is sure she disappoints the very people she wants to love. Again and again she fails. How can she ever truly be free?

Gwen

Gwen grew up in a stable, loving family. She went to church regularly and attended good schools. Today, Gwen is a manager with a reputable company, and she has a responsible husband and three healthy children. Life hasn’t been easy, to be sure, but Gwen

is generally happy and functioning well. Except for one thing. She feels like a failure. A person doesn't have to suffer abuse or rebellion to feel ashamed.

Like Shannon, Gwen has been sinned against, though in different ways. And she consistently falls short when she compares herself with her friends and coworkers. In spite of perpetual dieting, she is overweight. So she is always ashamed and self-conscious about her appearance. At work, Gwen feels incompetent when others tease her for making mistakes or jeer her when she follows company policies. She thinks, "If I were the parent I should be, my children wouldn't need so much correction!"

Gwen lives with a nebulous sense of spiritual shame, too. She knows she is a sinner saved by Christ's grace, but she feels the weight of her own inadequacies more than she does the love of her Savior. She asks for God's forgiveness almost constantly, but she doesn't feel forgiven.

Gwen tries to make up for her inadequacies through her many acts of service at home and in the community. But she doesn't feel included. Gwen generally feels like a fake. Though she tries, she can't shake an underlying sense of personal failure, disapproval, and shame.

Where do people like Shannon and Gwen turn? How can they overcome their sense of shame? You may be surprised to hear that Jesus Christ holds the answers to the problem of shame, so we will consult Scripture to see what Gwen and Shannon have missed. But before we examine God's solutions, we will look at two kinds of shame and some common responses to each.

1

Shame-Filled Living

Shame is “a painful [guilty] feeling due to the consciousness of having done or experienced something disgraceful ... the feeling of being caught doing something bad or ... of being seen while sinning.”² Dr. Edward Welch describes shame-consciousness as “being exposed, vulnerable, and in desperate need of covering or protection. Under the gaze of the holy God and other people.”³

Shame may follow sinful actions, or it may arise from accepting blame or failure. Whether guilt is real or imagined, shame holds a person hostage with

- 2 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (electronic 2nd edn.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 1:309.
- 3 Edward T. Welch, *When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 24.

the condemning declaration, “You are bad!” Shannon and Gwen both live under that sentence. Perhaps you do, too.

No one likes feeling ashamed, but efforts to relieve shame often lead to frustration and increased distress. Below are some common reactions to persistent shame.

- ▶ Questioning God’s goodness and/or sovereignty
- ▶ Doubting God’s existence, love, and/or acceptance
- ▶ Rejecting God
- ▶ Social discomfort, leading to withdrawal
- ▶ Varying degrees of self-pity
- ▶ Mental and/or physical self-deprecation
- ▶ Self-sabotage or self-injury
- ▶ Addictive behaviors
- ▶ Wallowing in despair and self-doubt
- ▶ Indulging vengeful thoughts/actions, anger, and bitterness
- ▶ General irritability
- ▶ Anxiety and worry
- ▶ Perfectionism and/or legalism

- ▶ Escape or pursuit of relief through such means as daydreaming, overeating, overworking in career or ministry, intense pleasure-seeking, excessive socializing or social withdrawal, shopping, leaving home, adultery, divorce, or suicide

Perhaps you recognize some of these patterns in yourself or a loved one. Some of them may seem mild. But the results can be devastating to your soul and your relationships, even with people who are far removed from the source of your shame.

Shame generally takes two forms.

- ▶ “I am bad because of what I have done.” In this case, personal sin produces guilt, and out of guilt may come feelings that we will call “sin-shame.”
- ▶ “I am bad because of what other people have done.” The sins of other people hurt you in ways that may cause feelings that we will call “provoked-shame.”

Edward Welch describes these two sources of shame: “Sin-shame is something we bring on ourselves; [provoked-]shame is done to us. Everyone

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has the experience of sin-shame, but not everyone has this shame intensified by [provoked-]shame.”⁴

Sin-Shame

Sin-shame is the consequence of your actual guilt. When you offend God, the shame that results is true and right. If you have been mercilessly victimized, this may be hard news to hear. But it is important, so please read through this entire section. Liberating good news will follow.

SIN-SHAME IS A UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCE

Every person on earth, without exception, has committed what God calls *sin*. Sin is any thought or action that opposes or contradicts God.

One sin is all it takes to be a sinner.

For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.

(James 2:10)

⁴ Ibid., 26. Dr. Welch uses the term “victimization-shame” to describe the second type of shame that we will call “provoked-shame.” I have substituted the word “provoked” to avoid confusion.

If you have ever lied, entertained a lustful thought, or used God's name flippantly, you are guilty because of what you have done. God clearly says there are no exceptions:

All have sinned.

(Romans 3:23)

Gwen is guilty of harboring grudges, complaining, overeating, disciplining her children in anger, and hating the body God created for her. When Shannon curses her uncle, refuses to forgive her mother, doubts God, cherishes bitterness, or mistreats her body, she sins. Both are responsible for their responses.

Sinful responses may seem understandable or even reasonable, and you may think you can make up for them later. But sin is serious:

For the wages of sin is death ...

(Romans 6:23)

Good deeds, penance, and self-reformation are insufficient to undo the effects or penalty of sin. Scripture declares,

We are all like an unclean thing,

And all our righteousnesses [our best efforts] are like filthy rags.

(Isaiah 64:6)

As hard as it is to hear this, sin-shame tells you the truth: “I am bad because of what I have done.” Your guilt is real and irreversible. It needs to be addressed, but you are helpless to address it because you can’t undo it. Therefore, you need God to forgive your sins, exchange your guilt for his righteousness (putting you into a right standing with God, based on the merits of Christ—2 Corinthians 5:21), and provide new life and identity that powerfully fight shame (Ephesians 1:3–6).

Sin-shame is actually merciful because it was designed to drive you to God for his free pardon in Jesus Christ. When you respond by repenting, sin-shame is no longer necessary, so God removes it. We will discuss this further in the next chapter. But first we will consider the second source of shame.

Provoked-Shame

From a young age Shannon experienced provoked-shame: “I am bad because of what others have done.” Shannon’s uncle and mother sinned in ways that hurt

Shannon and fostered her sense of self-condemnation and disgrace. Even today she feels betrayed, exposed, embarrassed, and confused. Ashamed.

As with sin-shame, provoked-shame condemns Shannon as a bad person. But unlike sin-shame, provoked-shame is a lie. No matter how she may feel, the sins of other people do not condemn Shannon in God's sight (Ezekiel 18:20). Provoked-shame condemns no one before God. But, if believed, its lies can do terrible damage.

Gwen's coworkers ridicule her. Her husband is highly critical. She falls short of society's definition of beauty. Her close friend betrays her confidence. Gwen accepts provoked-shame's lies and condemns herself based upon the words and actions of others. So Gwen feels helpless, embarrassed, disrespected, and frustrated. Ashamed.

Provoked-shame seems hopeless because the sufferer cannot prevent or fix the sins of others. As with sin-shame, someone outside the situation must intervene. Jesus Christ is that someone. But before we look at Christ's solutions for shame, we need to unpack the problem a bit more.

Mistaken Tendencies with Sin-Shame and Provoked-Shame

We have seen that sin-shame tells the truth: “I am bad because of what I have done.” Sin-shame warns you of the condemnation of sin. When you heed the warning, sin-shame drives you to God. Therefore, sin-shame should be believed.

But provoked-shame lies to you—“I am bad because of what others have done”—and cruelly condemns you for something you can’t control. Provoked-shame should be rejected.

The power of shame is broken when truth is believed and lies are rejected, as we shall see in the next few chapters. However, the common tendency is to reject the truth of sin-shame and accept the lies of provoked-shame.

WHEN YOU REJECT THE TRUTH OF SIN-SHAME

Generally, you can react to sin-shame in one of two ways: by believing you are guilty and accepting God’s invitation to be forgiven in Christ, or by rejecting the truth of sin-shame and trying to deal with guilt on your own by excusing or denying sin, blame-shifting, or loathing yourself.

- ▶ Excusing or denying sin sounds like this: “What I did wasn’t so bad. It wasn’t really sin. I was just reacting normally. God understands how hard life is and won’t hold this against me.” But Scripture says every sin violates the purity and holiness of God; therefore, every sin offends him. Even one bite from forbidden fruit is enough to condemn you (Genesis 3). Christ had to die for even your smallest sins; they are that serious. “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10).
- ▶ Blame-shifting says, in effect, “My sin is understandable and acceptable because I was provoked. Someone else made me sin, so it’s not my fault.” But that attitude is not approved in Scripture. You are responsible for your responses to any situation. No one can make you sin; it is your choice. Christ is your example. Though he was brutally provoked, he did not sin. He provides all you need for godliness, so you have no excuse (Hebrews 4:14; 1 Peter 2:21–24; 2 Peter 1:3–9).
- ▶ Self-loathing goes to the other extreme. Instead of turning to God, the shame-driven person says, “I am so bad that I hate myself and must

be punished. I must pay for my sins. Even Christ can't help me." But God asks you to come to him for forgiveness, not to punish yourself. Amy Baker writes, "When we sin against God, there should be some loathing. But that should lead us to repent, not wallow ... We are all bad. That's why we need a Savior. It is pride to believe I'm so bad I don't deserve to be forgiven when God has promised to forgive the worst of sinners."⁵

WHEN YOU ACCEPT THE LIES OF PROVOKED-SHAME

There are many ways to interpret and exercise provoked-shame. All of them involve accepting responsibility for what others do, rather than rejecting condemnation. Here are a few examples. More will follow in Chapter 4.

- ▶ "People criticize, hurt, and reject me; therefore, I must be bad." The truth: God does not and will not hold you responsible for the sins of others. Their criticisms, harmful actions, and rejection reflect on them, not on you (Romans 12:17-21; Proverbs 17:15).

5 Amy Baker, *Cutting: Bleeding the Pain Away* (FBCM: The Biblical Counselor's Toolbox Series; Lafayette, IN: Faith Resources, 2006), 17.