

Spiralling Shame

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[0 : 00] And let's pray now for God's help. Father, we thank you again that you are a good God, and we just pray, Lord, that you would be at work in us, with us, to remind us of your great love, of how beautiful you are, of how amazing it is that you have come down to reach us and welcome us back into your fold.

So I just pray, Lord, that your word would be heard mightily this morning as your spirit does its work amongst us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

In the beginning, there was no shame. Just imagine that. No humiliation, no stigma, no disgrace, no knowledge of some skeleton in your closet that you need to keep hidden away, no awareness of any blemishes you need to cover up, no heightened sense of self-consciousness.

Of a voice constantly taunting you over some mistake you made. Just imagine that. And I say imagine because that's no longer our experience, is it?

We've all experienced shame at some level. It's that moment when you've created or done something that you're really excited about and you share it with others.

[1 : 23] But absolutely no one shares that excitement with you. It's that moment when you're called up and shouted at in front of your peers by your teacher or your boss.

It's that moment when someone tells you that their kid has gotten into a prestigious university when your son just told you yesterday his SPM results didn't turn up a single A.

So to read the opening chapters of the Bible is to be transported into a totally different world. And the Bible hits us straight away with this astonishing claim by saying, our world originally was a world without shame.

This is not fantasy. This was our reality. For in the beginning, Genesis 2.25, Adam and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame.

Just imagine a world where you're free to know and be known by one another, confident that you won't draw disapproval or disdain from the other.

[2 : 32] Now, that really would be paradise, would it not? And once upon a time, we live in paradise. So what happened?

If there was no shame, where did shame come from? Well, last week you might remember we looked at the first few verses of Genesis 3 and we explored how sin works as false faith.

Remember what sin does? It whispers to us, don't believe God is good and trustworthy and generous. Believe the opposite instead.

And that's the script. The devil is constantly selling us. He's always enticing us into believing his lies. And the devil is such a sophisticated scam artist because his lies work in multi-layered ways.

Remember verse 5? You can be like God, the devil whispers into our ear. So we saw last week that the devil is offering an attractive reward to get us to overreach and take over God's place in the universe.

[3 : 45] But I want you to notice something else today I didn't quite point out last week. Notice what else this smooth talker is insinuating in this verse.

Adam, Eve, he whispers. God doesn't want you to have what he has, which means he doesn't want to be as close to you as you think.

You are not as important to him as you think you are. Which means you are really a lesser being than you think.

You are not good enough for God. So once again, the devil casually plants the seeds of another lie into our hearts.

And if Adam and Eve had simply recalled Genesis 1, they would have seen the life of what it is. They would have seen they were very much beloved. After all, they were made in God's image,

made to rule like God, made to rest with God, to be blessed by him.

[4 : 57] But they didn't. And as they began to buy into the serpent's lies, they began to see the forbidden fruit as pleasing and desirable.

They began to see it as a solution to deal with the sense of inadequacy the serpent had cleverly sold to them. They did what we still do whenever we feel, even if subconsciously, that we are not good enough.

They looked for something to help them cope with that feeling. They looked not to God, but to the fruit. And they took it, ate it, and discovered to their horror it was no solution at all.

And shame now comes flooding in, in all its fullness. And that is the reason why shame has been part of our human experience ever since.

And here's the thing. Sin continues to wield shame very much as a weapon today. He uses it to keep us from God, to lock us into continuing patterns of sinful behavior.

[6 : 16] For as Genesis 3-4 will show us, sin works not only as false faith, but with a spiral of shame to handcuff us permanently to him so that we will never be free.

And we will explore how that works later on. But just before we take a deeper dive into Genesis 3 and 4, let me first ask this preliminary question.

What exactly is shame? What is shame? Well, shame is that feeling you get when you take pride in yourself as someone intelligent, someone who doesn't get tricked as easily as others, only for you to be successfully scammed out of a few thousand ringgit.

It's when you get upset with yourself and you keep saying, oh, how could I have been so stupid?

How could I have fallen for that? You feel small, exposed, uncovered, unprotected.

In other words, naked. It's when you feel insufficient as a person and say, I'm a failure as a worker or as a friend or as a spouse or as a parent or as a follower of Christ.

[7 : 40] So the experience of shame is about the self. It's the self judging the self. It's a heavy feeling indeed that weighs on you when you don't measure up to the ideal image of the person you wish to be.

And here we see the difference between shame and guilt. Guilt and shame are related, but they are not the same. You see, guilt gets you thinking, how could I have done that?

How should I be punished for that? How can I fix that situation and make amends? But shame gets you thinking, what an idiot I am for doing that.

How unlike so-and-so who doesn't do things like that. Guilt deals more with the sense of wrongness based on the action, while shame deals more with our sense of badness based on who we are.

If guilt says, I've done something bad, shame says, I am bad. And so there is a personal, subjective dimension to shame.

[8 : 57] We can see this dimension in the scriptures, in Job 10, verse 15, for example, when Job cries out, If I am guilty, woe to me.

Even if I am innocent, I cannot lift my head, for I am full of shame and drown in my affliction. That's how Job feels about himself.

But shame isn't just personal and subjective. There is also a social dimension. Now, as Asians, we know this very well, don't we? Losing face is simply our way of talking about shame.

It's that sense of dishonor that can fall upon a family or a community because of some unacceptable behavior. And the Bible has many examples of such social shame.

Proverbs 19, verse 26, for example, talks about how whoever robs their father and drives out their mother is a child who brings shame and disgrace. Now, here we are talking about a public shame that exists even if the child feels no shame.

[10 : 08] Or consider what Joseph does when he discovers Mary is pregnant, Matthew 1, verse 19. Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law and did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

He didn't want to subject Mary to the court of public disapproval, or, in other words, to social shame. So shame has a subjective and a social dimension.

And because it's subjective and social, that means sometimes we feel shame when we don't have to. Take Mary, for example.

Suppose she did feel ashamed. But, of course, the truth is she has nothing to be ashamed about, either personally or socially, because her pregnancy comes from God.

Any feelings of shame would be unwarranted. Or, I guess, in 21st century language, it would be toxic. Or, imagine if you're someone who grew up with alcoholic parents.

[11 : 20] And you could feel shame, either personally or socially, because you don't come from the right family. But there is no underlying basis for your shame. It wasn't within your control.

And so, the shame there is something you don't have to cling to. So, I just want to acknowledge that, because I'm not sure there's room elsewhere in the sermon for me to address that.

But, that's not all there is to it. You see, secular accounts of shame often talk about the subjective and social dimensions, but they usually miss one more dimension that the Bible takes very seriously.

And that is, shame has an objective dimension as well. In other words, sometimes we are ashamed because we are truly shameful.

we have truly done something wrong against God. We've truly dishonoured Him. We have sinned against Him. In Genesis 3, as they eat the fruit, Adam and Eve felt exposed and alienated for the very first time.

[12 : 32] And they should. They have disobeyed the Lord. They have disconnected themselves from Him. Or, take an example elsewhere in the Bible. Just consider what God says to the sinful Levites in Ezekiel 44, verse 13.

They are not to come near to me, to serve me, as priests, or come near any of my holy things or my most holy offerings. They must bear the shame of their detestable practices because they've done wrong.

They've violated the covenant. Or, take a contemporary example. What happens when we look at pornography? Often, we feel ashamed afterwards because we're disappointed, maybe even disgusted with ourselves.

That's the personal dimension. And we're scared of being exposed as someone who indulges in this particular kind of behaviour. That's the social dimension.

But we also feel shame because that's God's mechanism for showing us that we've done something wrong. We've violated something sacred.

[13 : 48] That's the objective dimension. To put it another way, sometimes the subjective experience or even the social stigma of shame points to our objective guilt.

truth. And here's our problem. In Genesis 3 verse 7, our eyes are open and we can't close them again. We can't unsee our nakedness, though we can try.

We are shameful and we have no idea what to do. But of course, because shame can be so overwhelming, we try to do something. How can we not? And this is where sin jumps in and weaponizes shame.

But how does sin do so? Well, Genesis 3 to 4 shows us three different ways. Firstly, it causes us to hide. That's been our natural way of dealing with shame ever since Genesis 3.

Do you feel a note of sadness when you begin to read verse 8? Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

[15 : 02] Now, here is God doing what he does all the time, enjoying his creation. And verse 9 suggests that he often enjoys it with us.

When God calls out verse 9, where are you? We would usually have answered back, I'm here, let's go see the dears today, God. We would rush to walk hand in hand with God, but no longer.

Instead, verse 9, we run from God's embrace instead. What a tragedy that is, isn't it? But that's because we've been exposed as traitors who've tried to take God's place.

We have to bear the shame of being the ones who tried to be like God in a way we could never be. And that's just too much for us. We're scared, verse 10, so we try to hide.

And we still try to hide today. Now, we don't do so physically, but we do so in every other way. And sin knows that and takes advantage of that.

[16 : 12] You see, in our rush to hide, what might we do? Perhaps we try to keep our shame buried, so we tell lies.

when I was a university student, my international student worker was a British-born Chinese called David Ng. Today, he teaches at the Melbourne School of Theology.

But when he first got into full-time ministry, his father was very angry about that, because to him that was socially unacceptable. So much so that he would outright lie to his friends.

He was ashamed to tell them that his son was in church work, so he would just say, oh yes, David's a lawyer, or David's a banker, whichever it was.

He kept it a secret. That's what we do, don't we, to avoid feeling shame. Now we might not do it as shamelessly, pun intended, as David's father, but we do it whenever we're in a conversation and suddenly someone brings up a subject that we don't know anything about, but we kind of just nod along and pretend that we're very knowledgeable about the topic being discussed.

[17:26] We hide our ignorance because we don't want to be exposed as being that stupid person who doesn't really know anything. That would bring us shame. That's why we keep things hidden, why we tell white lies, why we filter information.

Or we hide simply by attempting to cover our shame with something else. Look at 3 verse 7 and watch as Adam and Eve desperately attempt to make coverings for themselves with fake leaves. It's meant to be funny and pathetic at the same time. But that's what we do. Sometimes we try to cover our shame by being extra religious, hoping that extra time at church would somehow win us the approval of God or other Christians.

We hope that that would somehow provide a covering for whatever it is that's causing us shame. Sometimes we try to cover our shame by busyness. For if we fill every hour of the day with activity, then we might be able to forget whatever shame we are bearing.

Sometimes we try to cover our shame by taking on a particular personality, perhaps by being that guy who always jokes around. That way, no one will ever see the real me underneath that personality.

[18:56] Sometimes we turn to some addictive substance, alcohol, cigarettes, or even just our phone and our computer games, hoping that would act as a temporary cure.

But sometimes that just leads to a further spiral of shame as we feel stupid for depending on those things in the first place. And yet we keep going back to those God substitutes.

That's exactly how sin likes it. And sometimes we hide by redrawing from others. One of sin's strategies in weaponizing shame is by isolating us and cutting us off from others.

It makes us think that if others knew what we are really like, they could never, ever possibly love us. This is especially, though not exclusively true, of sexual sin, lust, adultery, same-sex relationships. That's when sin especially loves to say to us, you better hide, don't ever confess your sin to God, or expose your sin to anyone else, because if you do, they'll be super disgusted with you, you'll be properly disgraced then, and you will experience the trauma of shame all over again.

[20:22] So we hide from our families, we hide from our spouses, we hide from our church friends, and as a result, we feel disconnected from others, and sin loves that, because it thrives where there is secrecy and silence.

Shame is not just the result of sin, but provides the conditions in which sin can grow further. And that brings us to the second way sin weaponizes shame.

For secondly, it causes us to blame others. In verses 10 to 11, Adam and Eve run out of hiding places. So, verse 11, when God questions them, Adam changes strategy.

When God asks, who told you you were naked? Adam answers, verse 12, the woman you put here with me. Do you see what he's doing?

Hey, God, it's my wife's fault. She's the reason. And, hey, what was I supposed to do? Don't forget, you are the one who gave her to me.

[21:36] maybe God should have thought about this a bit more, right? So, in just one sentence, Adam has already shifted blame both onto the woman and onto God.

So, Adam, the first man of the human race, is also the first man to pass the buck. He establishes the pattern. And the woman's a quick learner, verse 13.

Just as quickly, she deflects blame onto the serpent. The serpent deceived me and I ate. You see, whether we are male or female, rich or poor, whatever ethnicity we are, this is what we do.

It's the fault of my lazy co-worker, it's the fault of my careless classmate, it's the fault of my unfair boss, it's the fault of the government, it's just never my fault. It lies behind many a failing marriage, where shame first causes the spouse to hide from one another, and when that no longer works, they lash out against each other.

Shame, once again, leads us to more sin, as we unjustly deflect blame onto others in order to avoid taking responsibility.

[22 : 55] But it doesn't resolve anything. My friends, blaming others doesn't heal you. It just extends the spiral of shame.

Thirdly, it can cause us to rage. As the narrative proceeds, we find the spiral keeps continuing on in Genesis 4. For here we find the story of two brothers.

One is called Cain, which means something like to produce, to bring forth, to gain. It is a name filled with honour. And if you were here for our recent Ecclesiastes series, you would know what able means.

Hebel. It's literally breath, meaning something like fleeting and frustrating, so it's not exactly an honourable name. But as the story goes along, we discover that they both bring offerings to the Lord.

But here's a surprise. Cain's offering is rejected, while Abel's is accepted. And the commentators debate why exactly Cain's offering is rejected.

[24 : 10] Maybe he didn't bring his best offerings or the appropriate offerings. But for our purposes today, it's not important to figure that out, other than that he did something wrong.

What we want to notice today is how Cain reacts. In verse 5, we're told he's very angry and his face was downcast.

More literally, it says his face fell. It's actually an expression of shame. After all, isn't he the superior brother?

Doesn't his very name show that? But now his inferior brother has beaten him. In verses 6-7, shame is the reason God asks, if you do what is right, will you not be accepted?

Or more literally, will your face not be lifted up again? In other words, God is offering him a way out of his shame. But Cain doesn't do the right thing.

[25 : 17] Instead, he lets his shame lead him to rage, violence, and eventually murder. You see, sometimes we react to shame in this way.

It happens on the international scene, when one country decides to escalate war against another because to withdraw now would be to lose face.

It happens in personal relationships, when our anger is really a subconscious strategy to get others to leave us alone so that we don't feel exposed. Shame is the driving force.

Men especially feel this. And so that's how sin can operate. It's a spiral of shame potentially leading us into more sin.

So what is the cure for shame? Now, if shame was purely subjective, as some secular psychologists suggest, then we could simply say, as they do, just improve your self-esteem.

[26 : 31] Engage in more positive thinking. Be kinder to yourself. Stay away from toxic relationships. Now, there can be some helpful things to take away from such advice.

Shame. I'm not saying disregard that. But, if there is an objective dimension to shame, then simply trying to feel better will never be enough.

It is not addressing the core issue, which is ultimately our actual shame before God. Without dealing with this, we will never be able to deal with shame in our human relationships.

But, I want to tell you some very good news today. God has provided a cure for shame. He does not leave us alone to deal with our shame.

Now, this cure is not like some magic formula, as if after you hear it this morning, you will leave this place never ever to struggle with shame again. No, no. That's not how it works. Rather, this cure is a little bit more like your IC card.

[27 : 39] It's what you take out and look at whenever you're caught in a spiral of shame. Because on that IC card, it says, I'm welcomed by the Father because I've been restored by the Son into the community of the Spirit.

That IC tells you who you really are in light of the Gospel. So, first, let's talk about the welcome of the Father.

Come back with me to Genesis 3 again and notice what comes straight after verse 7. Answer, verses 8 and 9.

Well, no duh, pastor. But friends, look again. As soon as Adam and Eve are filled with shame, what is the very first thing God does? He goes walking where they are hiding.

He calls out, where are you? Does that mean he doesn't know where they are? Of course not. He's God. But do you see what God is doing?

[28 : 47] He's pursuing them. He's giving them an invitation to come back to him. He is saying to them, I know you're trying to cover yourselves right now with all sorts of inadequate fig leaves and hiding behind a bush somewhere, but come back to me and I'll do a proper job of covering you.

And my brothers and sisters, are you someone today who is hiding from God? Maybe you've done something that you're truly ashamed of. Maybe you feel other people are acceptable, but you're not. Other people succeed, but you're a failure. Other people are pure, but you're unclean. Other people are important, but you're disposable. Other people are authentic, but you're a fraud.

And God says to you gently, maybe you are right to feel ashamed, if indeed what you have done is truly wrong. And your instinct to hide is not completely off the mark.

But here is the good news. Come hide in the right place. Come hide in me. God because when you look down at 3 verse 21, what can God do?

[30 : 10] God says, I can clothe you. I can cover you. Come naked before me, admit what you've done, and I can cover you.

But wait a minute, you might ask, doesn't God still cast Adam and Eve out of the garden? God do you know? Yes, he does because remember we bear shame objectively, not just subjectively. And so our position as outcasts reflects our status accurately. But by covering us beforehand, God is showing us what he plans to do.

He plans to welcome us back. Jesus tells us very much the same thing. In Luke 15, he tells a parable, one of his most famous of a son who says to his father, give me my share of the estate. In other words, dad, I wish you were dead. All I really want is your stuff, not you. What a shameful request to make. And he heaps further shame onto the name of his good father as he goes and squanders his entire fortune in while living.

[31 : 23] So what would you have expected his father to do, having experienced social shame. Perhaps do what Cain does, which is to fly into a rage.

Or disown his son as family, as Cain does his brother. But look again. Eventually, the son comes to realize what he's done.

He knows he has engaged in shameful behavior, and he has brought shameful shame, public shame to his family. he says, I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

Just make me a servant. But Jesus says, watch the father. Watch what he does as his son makes his way back. He runs to him.

He yells, son, he says, here is a feast waiting for you. And Jesus asks you, is this your picture of God? Well, this is who God says he is.

[32 : 21] he longs to welcome you back. He wants to restore you to a place of honor. But how can he do that? Well, second, let's talk about the restoration of the son.

For just as Jesus puts our focus on the father, so the father wants us now to focus on the son. And what do we see? Well, look at his family tree.

Sure, Jesus has kings as ancestors, but wait a minute, there are shameful women there too.

Tamar, who seduced her father-in-law. Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute.

And isn't Jesus himself conceived in dodgy circumstances too? I mean, come on, an unwed mother? So right from the beginning, Jesus chooses to associate himself with shame.

Then look at his ministry. Watch him engage with a Samaritan woman who doesn't measure up to her community standards of behavior. Watch him as he touches lepers and a woman whose bleeding makes her unclean.

[33 : 28] Watch him as he has dinner with dishonorable tax collectors, even including one of them in his band of disciples. Jesus is not ashamed to be seen with such people.

Then look as he goes the way of the cross. And what I want to put the focus on this morning is not so much the guilt he paid for but the shame he endured.

In honor shame cultures, public recognition of your position is very important. But as Jesus heads to the cross, does anyone want to publicly identify themselves with Christ?

His disciples abandon him? His lead disciple denies him three times. At his trial he affirms that he is the Messiah, the chosen king, but no one gives him that recognition.

And instead they mock him, fashioning a crown of thorns for him, mocking him on the cross as a fake king. Then watch him as he is stripped naked and nailed to a cross.

[34 : 39] Our modern paintings or carvings of the cross today usually never has Jesus completely naked, but don't forget that's what he was. As Jesus hung there, he was completely exposed,

unprotected, vulnerable.

But perhaps what is most shameful of all is the darkness that comes while he hung on the cross. In the Old Testament, in the Psalms, for example, to be thrown out into darkness is a sign that you've been cast out by God.

It's a sign of the curse. And now, Jesus bears our curse of sin as he bears the status of being an outcast from God, just like Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.

And in doing so, he transforms the very instrument of shame, the cross, into the symbol of the greatest honor. God. My friends, do you see that's what Jesus does?

He took the long walk of shame so that we never have to walk that walk ever again. He says if you trust in him, you get his glory and his honor.

[35 : 53] You get the status of being the children of God. He says he will cover you completely, which means you can now be completely open with him. And he wants to restore you and I.

You see, that's what he did with Peter in John 21 after the resurrection. Now, just imagine you were Peter on that day as you met Jesus on the shore. You can barely look him in the eye.

And as Jesus asks you, do you love me? Three times. You know that Jesus is deliberately getting you to recall that fateful night of shame.

he's exposing you. But he doesn't do so in order to shame you further. No, he does so to restore you and to release you.

You see, Jesus doesn't want us to suppress our shame, but to bring it to him so that like Peter, we can be free to serve him with joy. That's the cure for shame.

[36 : 56] Not merely by learning some behavioral techniques from psychologists, but by coming to terms with the welcome of the father and the restoration of the son.

And that's the only way we can properly stop the spiral of shame. But as we finish, let me just very, very briefly mention one more avenue for healing.

And so third, let's talk about the community of the spirit. Let's talk about the body of Christ. And I just want to draw our attention to just one verse, 1 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 23.

The parts we think are less honorable, we treat with special honor, and the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty. Now this verse is within the context of a discussion about spiritual gifts.

But there is a larger lesson here as well for us. For what Paul is doing here is casting a vision, a vision where those who are vulnerable, those whom we might be tempted to be ashamed of, are those whom we should actually treat with great care and tenderness.

[38 : 07] We are being presented with a vision of what a spirit-filled church looks like. And it has less to do with amazing miracles, and more to do with how much grace we show to others.

To be a place where those who take the risk to be vulnerable and make known their weaknesses, no, they will not be shame. You see, in this life, we will definitely struggle with shame still, but God wants to bring healing through his church.

But we must open ourselves up to be that kind of community for such healing to happen. So my friends, this is the gospel.

This is the remedy for shame. it is the good news that the Father pursues us to welcome us, to restore us through the Son, so that we can now become this community of the Spirit.

So I leave you with these words from Psalm 34 verse 5. Those who look to him are radiant, their faces are never covered with shame.

[39 : 19] So with that, let me just invite the band back up now. as even as I lead us in prayer. Father, we just want to come to you.

We recognize, Lord, the lingering shame that is present at differing levels in our lives. I just want to pray especially for those who might be struggling really hard now, for those who feel ashamed of something that they have done.

They know that they have done something wrong. but Father, I just pray that you will remind them and lead them back to Jesus, the one who can cover their shame fully, completely, totally, the one who invites them back into your embrace.

May they know that embrace today. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.