

Despising the Shame

Hebrews 12:1-2

The author of Hebrews succinctly describes the Christian life. Because so many triumphant witnesses surround us, we should do as they did: cast off all our burdens and sins which otherwise cling to us and run the race before us. We're not competing against one another, but we are *running*. This is a long race that requires endurance and a steady eye set on Jesus who both granted our faith in the first place and will perfect it at last. Jesus accomplished our salvation and modeled the way we are to work it out (Phil 2:12-13). For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame. What is that joy? The inheritance of the nations (Ps. 2:8). What is was the shame?

What is shame?

Shame has been called a traumatic exposure of nakedness. If guilt is about the bearing the burden of what you've done, shame is about being seen for what you are. It is the dread of being seen and known. We play games with our most embarrassing moments, but no one jokes about shame. Jean-Paul Sartre called it a hemorrhage of the soul. In shame we feel undesirable or lacking before someone whose opinion we care about. Dan Allender says shame includes four elements: exposure, revelation, dread of consequences, and empowering trust. We see all these at play in the garden after the fall: God sees Adam and Eve; they are aware of their nakedness and sinful shame; they fear what will happen and start blaming; their shame results from sin because they care what God thinks as their maker and master (Gen. 3:12-18; cf. Gen. 2:25). Shame can result from what we've done, but also from what others have done to us (2 Sam. 13:13).

What are the sinful effects of shame?

Because we are made in the image of a triune God, we have a deep desire to know and be known. Jesus says repeatedly that he knows the Father (Lk. 10:22; Jn. 8:19, 10:15, 17:25). In deepest communion, Adam knew his wife Eve, a physical, spiritual and emotional union (Gen. 4:1). But when shame entered, Adam and Eve hid it—behind fig leaves! We deal with sin by hiding it or pretending it's not there. Clothing was the first human invention after the Fall, but certainly not the last designed to hide shame. Like them, we get scared and hide from harmless opportunities and important duties alike. When hiding doesn't work, we deflect or blameshift: "Am I my brother's keeper?"; "The woman you gave me." We retaliate. We revel in it (Phil 3:19). Without intervening grace, the end of shame is isolation, alienation, and brokenness. We get scabbed souls, crusty and never healing.

What does the gospel do with our shame?

When Jesus suffered on the cross, he bore our shame (Is. 53:5). He was literally naked, soiled, spit upon and shamefully treated (Lk. 18:33). He came before the holy Father naked, clothed only in shame, and bore the brunt of his righteous hatred of sin (2 Cor. 5:21). Because Jesus rose, we are new creations in him and therefore able to confess and be healed from our shame (2 Cor. 5:17). Neither our sin nor the sins committed against us define or control us. Jesus comes and touches us like he did the lepers, saying "Be clean" (Lk. 5:12-13). We see him seated at God's right hand, vindicated. And we can strive to not be ashamed by how we live for the gospel (Phil. 1:20). Jesus despised the shame heaped on him, and yet he endured it to redeem us from ours.