

Un-
ASHAMED

HEALING OUR BROKENNESS
AND FINDING FREEDOM FROM SHAME

HEATHER DAVIS NELSON

Foreword by Ed Welch

“Heather Davis Nelson has written a wonderful work on the topic of shame. She brilliantly weaves her own stories and those of others into the larger story of what God does with our shame. She fearlessly brings the light of Jesus to shine in the dark recesses of our souls as she helps to free us from the pain of shame.”

Paul E. Miller, Executive Director, see *Jesus*; author, *A Praying Life* and *A Loving Life*

“Most of us can quickly point to a shame story from our past—that moment when we believed that we were shuntable, rejectable, and maybe even despicable. We, as heirs of God, so often live with a low level of misery caused by shame, even though Jesus came to set us free. In her insightful new book, *Unashamed*, Heather Davis Nelson explores the chains that bind us and then reminds us that we’re not just ex-sinners; we are saints who have been made new. Like a trusted friend, who also happens to be a therapist, Heather walks you to a place of freedom so you can be all Jesus intended you to be.”

Susie Larson, national speaker; radio host, *Live the Promise with Susie Larson*; author, *Your Beautiful Purpose*

“*Unashamed* proclaims that Jesus Christ secures freedom, honor, and glory for us and applies that truth to the many ways we all suffer shame. Because shame makes us feel naked, filthy, and excluded, we need to know the healing that comes from God’s declaration that in Christ we are clothed, clean, and accepted into the family of God.”

Justin and Lindsey Holcomb, authors, *God Made All of Me*, *Rid of My Disgrace*, and *Is It My Fault?*

“It is difficult to understand shame apart from the gospel. This book is all about the great exchange: shame for beauty. It will flood your soul with life and give you a breath of fresh air. Heather has given all of us who counsel—and all of us who struggle—a gift.”

Rod Mays, Adjunct Professor of Counseling, Reformed Theological Seminary; Executive Pastor, Mitchell Road Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina

“Heather Davis Nelson speaks from an authentic heart on a subject too painful and embarrassing for most to admit they struggle with. *Unashamed* is much more than informative or inspirational. This book could be life-changing. Heather does a beautiful job uncovering the amazing story of grace and redemption, showing how Christ can break the endless cycle of shame that leaves so many in bondage. I highly recommend *Unashamed* for anyone who desires to live a life of freedom and hope found in Christ, and for anyone who desires to point others to see beyond their shame and live victoriously.”

Monica Rose Brennan, Associate Professor and Director of Women’s Ministries, Liberty University

“Heather Davis Nelson has made a significant contribution to addressing the critical topic of shame, which is often ignored or misunderstood among the people of God. I declare myself her debtor for the help her work has been to my own sanctification.”

Joseph V. Novenson, Pastor, Lookout Mountain Presbyterian Church, Lookout Mountain, Tennessee

“*Unashamed* helped me see my misplaced shame and accept the freedom and love Jesus Christ offers me every day. I’m thankful for Heather’s heartfelt approach. Here is a thoughtful, knowledgeable, and biblical work.”

Trisha R. Wilkerson, author, *Everyday Worship*; biblical counselor

“Shame is a paralyzing, life-hindering reality we all experience. *Unashamed*, written by my dear friend Heather Davis Nelson, is not a book written primarily from her writing desk or her counselor’s office. This book was written from her personal faith journey through shame as she has sought to abide in Jesus and his Word through tears, pain, and faith crises. This is what makes the book so powerful. This is why I recommend the book for anyone. It is a signpost to Jesus and his healing, transforming gospel.”

Ellen Mary Dykas, Women’s Ministry Coordinator, Harvest USA; editor, *Sexual Sanity for Women*

“Heather Nelson has refreshingly and freely brought to light a topic that isn’t discussed much in Christian circles. I found myself breathing many sighs of relief as I realized I wasn’t alone in my experiences of shame. Heather continually pointed me to the only One who can fully cover and release me.”

Julie Courtney, Director of Women’s Ministries, see Jesus

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Healing Our Brokenness and Finding
Freedom from Shame

Heather Davis Nelson

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WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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To Seth, Lucia, and Alethia,
without whose love and grace these pages would not exist,
for you have given me courage to stay on this journey.

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Foreword

“Shame is everywhere,” writes Heather. “Each emotion I feel gets connected or tainted with shame if I let it.” She is right. It is everywhere, and it seems as though everything in life gets channeled through it. Yet it is so hard to talk about.

Shame has two conflicting instincts. It needs to isolate and hide, and it needs a community in which to be transparent. Hiding, of course, usually wins. It is the easier and more natural of the two. But we are savvy enough to know that the easy way is rarely fruitful, which leaves us with the hard way—and that seems impossible. Then, left with no viable option, we default back to hiding.

This is where *Unashamed* comes to our aid. Someone has to be the first to talk. Shame is pent up and just waiting for an opportunity to say something, but someone has to be the first to talk. Someone has to introduce a new culture that says, “We, as God’s people, known and loved by him, are implored by God to speak openly from our hearts. So let’s talk. I’ll start.” And Heather starts us talking. She speaks openly, and the rest of us feel free to follow.

Once we test the waters and begin to talk, we still need

Foreword

direction. That elusive sense of being unacceptable needs help being more specific. With this in mind, *Unashamed* takes us to places in our past that affect us more than we know, and it guides us to the present where shame that connects to perfection, body image, performance, and parenting invades the details of our lives.

Through all this, *Unashamed* keeps taking us back to Jesus, the one who both knew shame and takes our shame. Without him, there would be no reason to bring shame into the open. With him, we are built up rather than torn down, shame is forced to retreat, and we notice the possibility of joy as we know and are known by the Holy One.

Ed Welch
Author, *Shame Interrupted*

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to my counseling professor Ed Welch, who first taught me about the distinction between shame and guilt during his class at Westminster Theological Seminary in 2006. I later read his in-depth treatment of shame: *Shame Interrupted*. Concurrently, I stumbled upon the TED talks of prominent professor and shame researcher Brené Brown on the topic of shame and vulnerability. Her books *The Gifts of Imperfection* and *Daring Greatly*, as well as the ecourse on *The Gifts of Imperfection*, further illuminated the role shame has had in my own story. This book stands on the backs of these two professors, and I hope to build on their work through my offering.

I am beyond grateful to my clients over the past decade who have entrusted their shame-laced stories to me, and whose courage in being vulnerable and walking through the darkness to get to the light has inspired me in my own journey out of shame. You have paved the way for me and many others.

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This book is the culmination of dreams and ideas discussed over dinners, coffee, phone calls, and front porch conversations with many friends. I want to particularly thank the friends who offered invaluable insight and edits as they read portions of the first draft: Heather Byrne, Becky Buma, Maria Booth, Katherine Carrera, Beth Clarke, Julie Courtney, Jonathan and Nicole Davis, Katherine Donnithorne, Kelly Dwyer, Ellen Dykas, Erin Irwin, Lev and Karen Hojda, Kiran Lall-Trail, John and Christy Leonard, Lynette Landfear, Amie Patrick, Marty and Debra Paulaitis, Sally Proulx, Allyson Sabin, Robin Price Sanford, Jen Schaefer, Beth Schmidt, Anne Smith, Dan and Karen Thrush, Shelly Wagner, and Bob and April Willetts. Our church community at Trinity Presbyterian Church enthusiastically supported me and first heard many of these ideas in raw form—especially our community group and my women’s Bible study table 2015–2016.

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I would not have embarked on such a venture without the wholehearted support of my husband, Seth, and the many sacrifices he made to free me to engage in the writing process. Lucia and Alethia, thanks for letting Mommy write and for reminding me how to dance, play, and create as you do so shamelessly and effortlessly.

Above all else, I thank God, who is the Author of my story, and in whose Son Jesus Christ we have hope of being unashamed. He is the reason I write, now and always.



Acknowledgments

Most of the examples used throughout this book are a combination of various characteristics of friends, clients, and/or my own life. Proper permission has been sought and granted for the few examples that are not composites, and in all cases, identifying names and details have been changed to protect anonymity and privacy.

This book is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a professional counselor or a licensed physician. Readers should consult with their counselors and/or doctors in any matters relating to their health.

Introduction

Shame: Everyone Has It

I have always been terrified of public speaking. I can trace it back to eighth-grade graduation, when I froze on stage in front of my classmates and an audience of hundreds. Standing in front of the mic unable to utter a word, the expectant and anxious waiting, and an uncomfortable and heavy silence—these are what I fear anytime I am about to take the podium. This fear of being publicly embarrassed, of my weakness being unmasked in front of an audience who sees each excruciating moment, is one manifestation of shame in my life. At its core, shame is fear of weakness, failure, or unworthiness being unveiled for all to see, or fear that at least one other person will notice that which we want to hide. Shame is like a chameleon, easily blending into the surrounding environment so that it can't directly be seen.

Shame commonly masquerades as embarrassment, or the nagging sense of “not quite good enough.” It shows up when you attempt a new venture, or when you're unsure of your

place in a group. Unchecked, it can become an impenetrable barrier between you and others. It is not a topic of conversation at a party, although it is an unwelcome guest in every gathering. You may not know if you suffer under shame, because too often it's been categorized as guilt (which is its close cousin). It is not the exclusive domain of victims of abuse, yet shame is found in every story of suffering at the hands of another. Shame can linger when you have sinned against another in ways that feel unforgiveable. Shame is complicated.

Perhaps it might help to consider a few scenarios where shame begins to show itself.

Monique and Tony walk into a party full of laughing, well-dressed people, and Monique inwardly freezes. She is back in the halls of her high school, where she was always on the outside of such groups. She cannot bear to replay the story of rejection, and she wants to turn around and leave before they are noticed. It would be safer to go home.

Blake confesses his sexual addiction to Emily, and tears run down her cheeks. How could he? Emily berates him with all that she is feeling in that moment. Then she turns cold for weeks, barely speaking to him while cocooned within her books, journals, and work. She is alone, and so is he.

Christie's voice is hoarse from screaming at her toddlers. She glances at the windows, thankful they're closed and the neighbors can't hear the angry tirade that would discredit her as the kind, good Christian they think she is. She feels furious most of all with herself for losing it, and she does not know if

she can find her way back to grace this time. Surely there are limits to God's forgiveness of an angry mom?

Sam's red-rimmed eyes betray the late night at the bar the evening prior. He could not bear to hear Kelly's relentless criticism, and so he found refuge in the only place that felt safe. He feels like he can never be weak in front of her. His only option is to leave her presence and regroup until he can be the strong man she expects him to be for her.¹

Anna weeps over the phone with her best friend as she describes a marriage that feels hopeless and lifeless. No matter what she tries, Will cannot seem to see her, care about her, or change the behavior that is destroying their marriage and their family. She tells no one, for fear of what others would say—a dismissal or an attempt to minimize the pain she lives with daily.

Jake is alone. He assumed that by age thirty he would be well on his way to his dream of a successful career, marriage, and starting a family. Instead, Jake works an unmotivating job and cannot seem to garner enough courage to talk to the women he admires from afar, much less to ask them on a date. The worst day for him? Sundays, because he sits in a pew by himself surrounded by those who seem to have what he's missing. But what is he missing? Why can't he ever shake the feeling of "not quite good enough"?

Laura walked into fourth grade acutely aware of the new item she wore. She could finally read the blackboard without

squinting, thanks to her first pair of glasses. The plastic pink frames were the object of much attention from her fellow students, and it wasn't long before she heard the name: "Four Eyes!" From that moment, she counted the years until her eye doctor would permit her to be fitted for contacts. It would be eighth grade.



All of these scenarios describe shame. It's a word we do not often use in daily conversation, book groups, or church pulpits, but shame is something we all experience. It's the feeling that we have missed the mark according to our own standard or our perception of someone else's standard for us. Shame keeps us from being honest about our struggles, sins, and less-than-perfect moments. Fear of shame drives us to perfectionism in all areas of our lives, so that there would be no imperfection to be noticed and judged.² Shame is what we heap on others when they fail us. Shame keeps us holding onto bitterness and refusing to forgive. We are impacted by the shame of sin committed against us, and this drives a wedge into our relationships.

Shame can be darker and deeper too. It's what a perpetrator gives to his victim as he violates her. She will carry that shame forever unless she can find a way to bring it into the light of day. To disown it, she needs to name the shame as his. Shame can be the lack of parental affection and attention that leaves a child with the indelible mark of "not worthy." Shame arises from past sin that seems to forever haunt you. You know, *that* sin that you feel like you can't share with anyone.

So you stay in hiding, holed up in your lonely bunker of one, never letting anyone get close enough to see you, to see *that* part of you.

“Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging,” writes Brené Brown.³ Throughout this book, I will refer often to Brown’s research and findings. So you might wonder, why read this book instead of hers? I want to put her work into a biblical framework that will help make sense of life in a fallen world. If you’re not a Christian and you’re reading this book, I would ask you to have a bit of patience and keep reading. You’ll find that the topic of shame is worth addressing with hope. I believe that you will benefit greatly from the discussion from asking yourself: In what (or whom) do I hope?

Shame and Guilt: Similar, but Different

How is shame different from guilt? It’s crucial to understand the distinction. Brown writes: “The majority of shame researchers and clinicians agree that the difference between shame and guilt is best understood as the difference between ‘I am bad’ and ‘I did something bad.’ Guilt = I did something bad. Shame = I am bad.”⁴ Guilt is associated with actions while shame taints your entire identity. Ed Welch, a professor and counselor at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF), fills this out in the following ways:

- “Guilt can be hidden; shame feels like it is always exposed.”⁵

- “Guilt lives in the courtroom where you stand alone before the judge. It says, ‘You are responsible for wrongdoing. . . . You are wrong. . . . You have sinned.’ *The guilty person expects punishment and needs forgiveness.*”⁶
- “Shame lives in the community, though the community can feel like a courtroom. It says, ‘You don’t belong—you are unacceptable, unclean, and disgraced’ because ‘You are wrong, you have sinned’ or ‘Wrong has been done to you’ or ‘You are associated with those who are disgraced or outcast.’ The shamed person *feels worthless, expects rejection, and needs cleansing, fellowship [community], love, and acceptance.*”⁷

To expunge guilt, confession and forgiveness are needed. Eradicating shame calls for a deep and pervasive antidote, one that will strike shame at its root and transform the way you think about who you are and the relationships in your life. Brown begins to touch on this when she says, “The antidote to shame is empathy and vulnerability.”⁸ Many relationships have been transformed by putting into practice increased empathetic responses and vulnerable sharing. Conflicts often arise because one person struggles with vulnerability (closes off/shuts down/withdraws) and the other has a hard time with empathy (does not listen without judging in order to understand, or does not listen at all). It is easy to see how a lack of empathy leads to a diminishing vulnerability, which leads to a lack of empathy, and on and on it goes. Interrupting this cycle is crucial. But we know that our ability to empathize and be vulnerable is not enough to heal shame at its source.

The Limits of Empathy and Vulnerability

Most of us can think of a time when we risked vulnerability only to experience deeper rejection, and therefore our shame messages were reinforced. And most of us can likewise think about how being empathetic was not enough to encourage the deceptive spouse or betrayed friend to trust us again or to tell the truth. There must be more than empathy and vulnerability. We live in world of broken people who cannot at the end of the day be trusted with our most vulnerable selves, nor can they trust us to be as empathetic as needed when they are in their most fragile moments. We all have been disappointed by others, and we all have disappointed friends, family, colleagues, and spouses—even those with whom we claim deepest intimacy. We wear shame like a shield, hiding who we know ourselves to be and protecting ourselves from whom we fear others could be.

Into the dark hopelessness of the human condition steps a Person—one who left his perfect relationship of impeccable empathy and total vulnerability; who left the perfect place where neither guilt nor shame exists because sin is absent; and who chose to leave perfect trust to be utterly vulnerable. He who knew the depths of the darkness of human hearts entrusted himself to us as a baby, making himself so vulnerable that he would not physically survive without human care. He who had never felt betrayal was betrayed by his closest friends, and he who knew no sin *became sin for us*, feeling to the depths of his being our pain. There is no greater empathy than how Isaiah describes Jesus: “Surely he has borne our

griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isa. 53:4). It is in relationship with this grief-laden Savior that our shame will begin to dissipate. It is through his vulnerability that we learn to entrust ourselves to fellow broken people, and it is in his empathy that we know we are never alone, though all humans may betray or disappoint us.

Through union with Christ you are clothed with honor rather than shame, made part of a community to which you will always belong, and given a kingdom that cannot be taken away. Walking by faith according to our true identity of being “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3) will transform our relationships, our parenting, our churches, our marriages, and our work. Shame will linger for as long as we await the life to come, but its voice will become quieter and its claims less insistent as we remember the reality that its hold on us is limited and fleeting.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you define shame? How is it different from guilt?
2. Which shame scenario do you identify with the most?
3. When has someone disappointed you? Can you think of a time when you disappointed someone else?
4. How is Jesus an embodiment of perfect empathy and vulnerability?

Exchanging Shame for Beauty

And I will deal severely with all who have
oppressed you.

I will save the weak and helpless ones;
I will bring together
those who were chased away.

I will give glory and fame to my former exiles,
wherever they have been mocked and shamed.

Zephaniah 3:19 (NLT)

One glance at your clothing, and I tend to make assumptions about who you are, what you do, perhaps even where you live. Why is clothing so defining? Clothes indicate purpose, even employment. When you're in aisle six at Target looking for your kid's favorite brand of cereal, you probably look for

that familiar red shirt indicating an employee. Clothing serves to identify us.

Shame can clothe you or expose you. It comes after struggling yet again with the bad habit you're trying to break, or the temptation you've given in to after days of resistance. It's what I feel like I'm wearing when I have yelled at my children (again). I go back and ask them to forgive me, but shame is that lingering sense that I have failed beyond rescue. That I have failed because *I am a failure*. Shame clothes me because I have not met my own expectations, nor those of my culture. In our Western American culture, male anger is usually tolerated more than female anger. So when I as a woman erupt in anger, my shame increases because I am not supposed to struggle with *this* type of sin.

I know that the *guilt* of my sin is covered because I believe the Bible's promises, such as what we find in Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord," and Psalm 32:5: "I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.' And you forgave the iniquity of my sin," but how do I get rid of the *shame*?

Shame clothes me when my failure has been noticed by another. For instance, if I get condescending, judgmental, or pitying looks from fellow shoppers in the midst of my child's tantrum, I feel cloaked in the shame of being judged as a bad mom. If I give a public presentation that doesn't go well, I feel ashamed because I failed with an audience.

Shame is cyclical. Sometimes we feel shamed by another's

behavior toward us, and we try to get rid of the shame by giving it to someone else. The problem is that shame cannot be transferred. It multiplies like yeast in a batch of rising dough. My husband shamed me/us through nodding off while talking to dinner guests, and I felt like he betrayed my standard of perfect hospitality. Therefore I returned the shame to him through a demeaning comment about him in front of our guests. Where does shame stop? How can we break the cycle of reacting to shame with more shame? We have to change our clothes, our identities. We need new clothing, and when exposed by shame, we need adequate clothing.

A Biblical History of Clothing

Our first parents discovered the problem of inadequate clothing the hard way in the garden of Eden at the beginning of time. In Genesis 3, we see Adam and Eve hiding from God, because after sinning by eating the forbidden fruit, they realized they were naked. Their first impulse was to sew fig leaves together to make clothes (v. 7). Of course, these clothes were not enough to cover their guilt and the resulting shame from knowing their relationship with God was broken. And so even while clothed, they hid from God as he walked toward them (v. 8). After their confrontation, which is full of questions on God's part and blame-shifting by Adam and Eve, God pronounces the curse—declaring the brokenness that would seep into all of humanity and creation because of their rebellion. They are expelled from Eden, and the chapter ends.

But before the bleak ending of Genesis 3, there is an act of

mercy and love we often overlook. “And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them” (v. 21). He who remembers that we are dust knows that the fig-leaf loincloths will not cover them sufficiently, so he does what they cannot do for themselves: *he clothes them*. The clothing required death of animals, and here we see the first sacrifice. Although it might seem like an unnecessary sacrifice because it did not atone for their sin (a Redeemer would have to come for that), it *did* cover their shame—at least temporarily.

Does your clothing do that for you?

In the very beginning of creation, at the point of sin’s entrance into an otherwise perfect Paradise, clothing comes both as a result of sin and as covering for the shame sin always brings in its wake. Adam and Eve need clothing because sin has opened their eyes to their nakedness; but God gives clothing because his eyes are opened with compassion to the shame that now exists in them because of sin.

Clothing covers, and it identifies. Only clothing given by God can do anything about the shame you and I wear as a garment, or the shame that we feel we cannot escape because it perpetually unclothes us. We see echoes of this theme throughout redemptive history as it unfolds in the pages of the Old Testament. Those without clothing are marked by shame, and those with shame are marked by their clothing. The story of Tamar illustrates this tragically. She is raped by her brother Amnon who immediately despises her after he has violated her: “Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with

which he had loved her” (2 Sam. 13:15). He calls his servant to put her out of his house, and the scene of what happens to her clothing is painted vividly:

Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves, for thus were the virgin daughters of the king dressed. So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore. And she laid her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went. (2 Sam. 13:18–19)

We find few scenes in the Bible more tragic than this one. God is moved to compassion for this woman in her shame because of sin committed against her, violation of the most tragic kind. He sees her shame vividly, even when her own father, King David, ignores it and minimizes it. God does not retaliate by giving violence back for violence as her brother Absalom tries to do (and subsequently throws the entire kingdom into an uproar). Instead, he promises a Redeemer who will be a perfect King and perfect defender. He hears, and he answers the question Tamar asks that falls on the deaf ears of her lust-filled brother: “As for me, where could I carry my shame?” (2 Sam. 13:13). This One will be moved to compassion by those like Tamar, we who wear the ashes of shame like a garment. He will carry her shame and ours to its full extent, with arms stretched wide on a beam of wood. Tamar was forced to wait for the perfect king to do what David could not do: bring the justice she longed for and restore the dignity Amnon stole from her. In Jesus, we now have the perfect King, who promises his

people, “Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame” (Isa. 49:23).

Isaiah records Jesus’s mission statement this way:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are
bound;
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
*to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;*
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified. . . .
Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion;
instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot;
therefore in their land they shall possess a double
portion;
they shall have everlasting joy.” (Isa. 61:1–3, 7)

Garments of Joy, Beauty, and Honor

No one who feels shame experiences true joy. A client once told me that it had been years since she was happy, and in the next breath said that she constantly felt shame. She could never

shake the feeling of not measuring up, the feeling that God was angry with her. Although she knew the truth intellectually, she told me in tears, “I want to be free!”

Joy is a hallmark of one who is free from shame. Jesus comes to bring joy as he removes your garments of shame and gives you a royal headdress instead. In place of shame, he gives honor, beauty, joy, comfort, justice, favor, and freedom—what our hearts long for most when shame rules our emotions, thoughts, and desires.

We actually crave these *more* than empathy and vulnerability, which Brené Brown prescribes as shame’s antidote. Practicing empathy and vulnerability is a start. They point you down a path of acknowledging how pervasive shame is to the human experience, but they offer no permanent remedy.

What about a holistic cure that reaches each aspect of shame’s damage? Consider what Jesus offers:

- Jesus comes to give honor instead of dishonor—all the ways you have felt and experienced rejection.
- Jesus clothes you with beauty, removing the ashes of shame you’ve worn for your sin or for the sinful atrocities committed against you.
- He comforts you as you mourn, releasing you from the shame of grieving alone or without purpose.
- Whether in this life or in the one to come, he brings justice for the injustice you’ve suffered because of your race, faith, gender, or family.
- Jesus brings favor—oh, favor of the Lord that is permanent and unchanging—instead of the vague cloud of constant disapproval.

And what is the result of Christ's work? Joy and freedom, the exact opposite of shame. Shame always steals joy and limits freedom. Shame binds us in chains that feel unbreakable to realities that seem unchangeable. Jesus frees you in the Spirit of the Lord.

The Great Shame Exchange

How can Jesus free you from shame? Through something as simple and as hard as faith. It is a faith that agrees that you cannot rescue yourself from your shame, that your attempts to clothe yourself have been as futile as the fig-leaf loincloths our first parents crafted. It is a faith that addresses the complication of shame mingled with guilt. This faith gives you an underlying confidence that your sin truly has been atoned for and taken away by a dying-now-resurrected Savior. It's a faith that puts you at the mercy of the only trustworthy One, realizing that his human image-bearers have failed you in a myriad of ways, and that you have also failed those around you. It is a faith filled with hope that freedom is possible *because it is promised by this trustworthy One*, guaranteed by the signature of a promise signed with his own blood.

This shame exchange is costly. Jesus willingly clothed himself with your dishonor, giving his shame-free identity to you if you will be united to him in faith. It is very costly for Christ, but not for us. All it costs us is the humility of admitting we cannot cover our own shame. We receive honor; he took our shame. We are lavished with grace; he was stained with our sin. We receive salvation; he experienced damnation. Because

Jesus was separated from the Father, we never will have to be. “Indeed, *none* who wait for you [God] shall be put to shame” (Ps. 25:3). “None” except for one, Jesus Christ, who bore our sin, guilt, and shame, that we might know forgiveness, redemption, and freedom.

If you are wondering how to begin the shame exchange, try to pray along with these cries of the psalmist:

- “O my God, in you I trust; let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies exult over me” (Ps. 25:2).
- “Oh, guard my soul, and deliver me! Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you” (Ps. 25:20).
- “In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me!” (Ps. 31:1).
- “O LORD, let me not be put to shame, for I call upon you” (Ps. 31:17).
- “You know my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to you” (Ps. 69:1).
- “Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope!” (Ps. 119:116).

As you pray and cry out to this Lord, asking him that you would not be put to shame, remember that you pray with the cross and resurrection in the rearview mirror—a signature guaranteeing the certainty that we are heard and we will be answered. Shame is often tied to the past. We ruminate about past failures or sins, or past abuses we suffered, or words spoken to us in formative stages of life that seem to lodge forever in our heart’s memory. We who dwell in shame must remember that shame’s remedy is also past. “It is finished,” Jesus cried

from the cross, and that cry echoes into every corner of sin and shame and brokenness (John 19:30). We can know that what was finished on the cross will be fully realized at the end of days. Instead of living enchained to past shame, we can live tethered to future hope of our shame-free destiny. We will be clothed in wedding garments of “white linen, bright and pure” (Rev. 19:8). There will be no shame in the dwelling place of God, which our clothing will serve to reflect.

Where We Are Going: Shame Disappears in Community

Because we are clothed with Christ’s perfect honor, we can put off shame’s ragged lies now. I am no longer a shamed one; I am an honored one. And so are you. So how do we live in the present when shame raises its ugly head?

We must recognize that we are not alone. Shame cannot stand the light of community and truth-telling. As I sat with two friends at Starbucks one Saturday afternoon, I felt our shame melt away as we shared our eerily similar middle school shame stories, which had been triggered by present-day situations. I shared about the way that all the girls in my eighth-grade class decided that they did not like me. To feel and experience my peers’ rejection at the age of thirteen deeply branded me with shame that has not been easily overcome. I feel it each time I come to a new group. Will they accept me? How long before the group turns against me? Shame tells me that I am unworthy and there is something deeply repulsive about who I am.

My friends joined in with their own stories. One shared

about a list the girls in her middle school wrote about her, delineating all of the reasons they no longer liked her. We each described almost obsessive desires to include others so that no would ever feel rejected like we had felt. We are all recovering people-pleasers learning not to fear rejection and to speak up when truth needs to be shared in the context of our jobs and relationships. Many days we live confident of our unshakeable identities in Jesus, honored instead of defined by the past experience of rejection. We are committed to being part of our Redeemer's shame-eradication mission in each other's lives. We know that we can go to each other, share the shame we're feeling, and be met with empathy *and a reminder of our gospel identity*.

Your sin is forgiven, yes and amen, and how we need this daily! But Jesus came to do even more than give you a blank slate. In union with Christ by faith, honor is part of your past and your future. Beauty rather than ashes, joy instead of despair. You are a new person—not merely an “ex-sinner” but a redeemed saint. Do you doubt this?

Think about Paul's addresses to the churches in the New Testament. If the apostle Paul were writing your church a letter, it probably would not be a letter of commendation. The usual pattern in the Epistles is that there is egregious sin that must be confronted (e.g., the Corinthian church that was tolerating a number of sexual sins, as well as drunkenness at the Lord's Supper) and poor theology that needs to be corrected (e.g., the Thessalonian church that had stopped engaging in their daily work life because they were sitting around waiting for heaven).

Poor theology always leads to sinful practice, and sinful living is always rooted in poor theology—misunderstanding and misbelieving who God is, what the Bible teaches, and who Christians are. Yet despite the brokenness of the churches to which Paul writes (reminding us that there has *never* been a perfect church nor will there be), he begins almost every letter the same way. See if you can detect the pattern:

- “To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7).
- “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2).
- “To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia” (2 Cor. 1:1).
- “To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1).
- “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi” (Phil. 1:1).
- “To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae” (Col. 1:2).

Do you see it? Paul addresses them all as *saints*. Saints are those who are holy, set apart, and linked with God’s holiness. And if you believe in Jesus, *this is who you already are*. Remembering and meditating on your identity *within the community of fellow saints* will help to weaken shame’s hold on your life.

We must see how your story of shame and my story of

shame connect to the story of Christ's covering our shame. Jesus is the only true refuge for the shame-filled; he came to clothe every area of your life with his honor and righteousness.

In my journey of shame, which started in the middle-school classroom, having traveling companions has made all the difference. They help me to press deeper into the truth that is always ready to be rediscovered. I am clothed in honor and beauty instead of shame. Instead of my exclusion, Jesus was placed “outside the camp” so that I might be brought in to the fellowship of the Divine. Jesus experienced separation from God the Father so that I would never be rejected from the one whose acceptance matters eternally. Instead of feeling quieted by shame, I am learning to speak up as an honored, beloved daughter of the King of kings within the community to which I belong—right beside you as you do the same.

Will you join me as I examine major types of shame—body shame, performance shame, and relationship shame—and the various arenas where our shame threatens to hijack our lives, including parenting, marriage, and church? Will you dare to look at the places in your life that are tainted with shame and bring them into the light of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection for you? Will you suspend your doubts and perhaps even your cynicism for a few pages and find an honor waiting for you that answers your deepest feelings of unworthiness?

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What makes you feel exposed to shame? How have you tried to cover it?

Unashamed

2. How does God offer to clothe your shame? How do you know you can trust him to do so?
3. What difference would it make for you to view yourself as a saint?
4. What is one small step of faith you could take to begin to be rescued from your shame?

SHAME IS EVERYWHERE

Whether it's related to relationships, body image, work difficulties, or a secret sin, we all experience shame at some point in our lives. While shame can manifest itself in different ways—fear, regret, or anger—it ultimately points us to our most fundamental need as human beings: redemption.

Shame never disappears in solitude, and Heather Davis Nelson invites us to not only be healed of our own shame but also be a part of healing for others. She shines the life-giving light of the gospel on the things that leave us feeling worthless and rejected, giving us courage to walk out of shame's shadows and offering hope for our brokenness. Through the gospel, we discover the only real and lasting antidote to shame: exchanging our shame for the righteousness of Christ alongside others on this same journey.



“Nelson fearlessly brings the light of Jesus to shine in the dark recesses of our souls as she helps to free us from the pain of shame.”

PAUL E. MILLER, Executive Director, see *Jesus*; author, *A Praying Life* and *A Loving Life*

“Like a trusted friend who also happens to be a counselor, Nelson walks you to a place of freedom so you can be all Jesus intended you to be.”

SUSIE LARSON, national speaker; radio host, *Live the Promise with Susie Larson*; author, *Your Beautiful Purpose*

“*Unashamed* proclaims that Jesus Christ secures freedom, honor, and glory for us and applies that truth to the many ways we all suffer shame. We need to know the healing that comes from God's declaration that in Christ we are clothed, clean, and accepted into the family of God.”

JUSTIN AND LINDSEY HOLCOMB, authors, *God Made All of Me*, *Rid of My Disgrace*, and *Is It My Fault?*



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