

God's sovereignty and the interplay between guilt and shame

For Joseph's brothers to truly receive Joseph's forgiveness, they had to deal with their shame. Joseph sees this and says that it was God who sent him to Egypt. They "meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."

What's the difference between guilt and shame?

Guilt is an inward recognition or feeling that occurs when we compromise our own standards of conduct or violate a moral standard, a product of the inward conscience. It results from what the Bible calls sin and its outgrowth, trespass. It's usual outward expression is remorse, regret or sorrow.

Shame is the public face of sin or trespass, but can result from events outside your control, and scales from embarrassment up to life-ending mortification. It touches on who we are in relation to society and others. It's outward-facing. A truly shamed "self" is not just embarrassed, it's defiled, damaged, totally disgraced.

Shame causes us to fall silent, to hide, to cover ourselves (like Adam and Eve), to want to disappear, even to die.

Shame is akin to a curse placed on us by our whole social belief system.

Most ancient cultures, tribal societies and some modern nations like Japan are shame and honor-based. Societies influenced by Judaism, Christianity are guilt-based. Islamic countries have a mixture of both ("honor killings" for instance, though not part of Islamic teaching, are imbedded in some Middle Eastern cultures).

In tribal shame-and-honor based cultures, violating a taboo can sometimes drive a person to die of shame and fear, from what's described as "voodoo death." Death in that instance is the only way to escape the shame. The social pressure induces a heart attack. In other societies it takes the form of suicide. A Japanese samurai might commit hari kari to attenuate shame and dishonor. (A line of Japanese soldiers committed suicide outside the Imperial palace when Japan surrendered to the U.S. in 1945).

Despite being part of a developing "guilt-based culture," there is always shame to deal with when sins are exposed publicly, and that was what still troubled Joseph's brothers.

They were "dumbfounded" when Joseph first revealed himself (**Genesis 45:3**), because of shame, which tends to silence us and turn us to stone, hoping for invisibility.

Joseph's acknowledgment that God was sovereign - even in their own intention of evil - allowed them to accept Joseph's forgiveness and continue living.

Genesis 45:7 - “And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

Although we live in a guilt-based Judeo-Christian culture, shame still carries great weight.

The church too often neglects the subject of shame in its discussion of Christ’s atonement.

If we believe that the elect were “appointed to eternal life” (**Acts 13:48**) then we also must believe **Isaiah 26:12** - “All our works, Thou, O God, hast wrought in us.”

That means for us, as well as for Joseph’s brothers (**Genesis 50:20**), we “meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”

All the references to a “new creation,” the old man vs the new man, provide a solution for shame. Jesus atoned for our sins by his blood, and he bore away our feelings of guilt and shame in his death, by which we also died with him.

Let’s repeat that: He bore away our shame. And we died. His justice is satisfied, but we are freed from shame.

Romans 6:6-8, 11 - “We know that our old man was crucified with him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. (For someone who has died has been freed from sin.) Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ... So consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

“Someone who has died” has also been freed from shame.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19 - “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.”

“reconcile” is *katallasso* - to cause one thing to cease and another to take it’s place, change or exchange, as coins for others of equal value, to reconcile.

Joseph had already forgiven his brothers, but their shame had yet to be dealt with. It caused them to continue to be deceitful, saying that Jacob had requested that Joseph forgive them. Shame kept them from fully receiving the forgiveness.

That’s why Joseph emphasized what he had hinted at before, that regarding their betrayal of him, God had meant it, intended it, for good.

Only Joseph could say that with integrity. He was the one sinned against. In the same way, only God could say he has “wrought all our works in us” and that we “meant it for evil, but he meant it for good.”

It’s a mind-boggling paradox that only the Cross can untangle.

By accepting the sacrifice of Jesus as bearing away our guilt and shame, we are also acknowledging God’s sovereignty in coordinating history toward that moment when He became human, took on the sin and shame of humanity and carried it to the cross. And he was also coordinating our own history to bring us to Him.

The ultimate “telos,” goal, perfection and completion of God’s sovereignty has always been salvation and redemption through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Romans 8:28 - “In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Although God is in control, he does it without violating his standard of justice. Nothing he does is “unfair.”

Romans 9:14 - “There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!”

Nebuchadnezzar, who knew something about sovereignty, was humbled by God and then confessed: “... [God’s] kingdom endures from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing. He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, ‘What hast Thou done?’” (**Daniel 4:34-35**).

King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged the murder of Uriah, her husband.

David confessed, “My sin is ever before me..” (**Psalms 51:3**) Yet because he understood repentance, he is called a “man after God’s heart.”

Shame was imposed on Jesus by the Romans at the crucifixion, but also took our shame on himself:

Hebrews 12:2 - “Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for (or, instead of) the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Execution on the cross produced only disgust in the first-century world, and equated those crucified with the worst offenders of society.

“His friends gave way in shaming abandonment; his reputation gave way in shaming mockery; his decency gave way in shaming nakedness; his comfort gave way in shaming torture. His glorious dignity gave way to the utterly undignified, degrading

reflexes of grunting and groaning and screeching.” - John Piper

Paul, who no doubt felt great shame that he persecuted the church (**Acts 22:4,5,20**), can still then go on to say, "...Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." (**Acts 23:1**) and "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus..." (**Romans 8:1**).

Satan, the accuser, and our own minds, will continue to condemn and stir up both our guilt and our shame, but we can respond by pointing to the cross, and saying with Paul:

Galatians 2:20 - "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

Jesus blotted out conscious shame felt by the adulterous woman and publicly brought to consciousness the repressed shame of the Pharisees. Their silent withdrawal was an admission of their own shame. (**John 8:10-11**)

The outcome of the atonement:

"As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us" (**Psalms 103:12**).

"I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, And like a cloud, your sins..." (**Isaiah 44:22**).

"My people shall never be ashamed." (**Joel 2:26**)

"Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; Neither be disgraced, for you will not be put to shame; For you will forget the shame...and will not remember the reproach...anymore." (**Isaiah 54:4**)

These warnings show that the shame of Adam and Eve's "nakedness," being spiritually uncovered, is the root of every other kind of shame:

Revelation 3:18 - "I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see."

Revelation 16:15 - "Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame."

Jude 1:13 - "Raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever."

Philippians 3:19 - "Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things."

Jesus took our shame because he took our “selves,” transformed them and re-birthed us through the Spirit as new creations.

To those burdened with shame, Paul’s admonition to “reckon yourselves dead” (**Romans 6:11**) is a blessing. The only way to be rid of shame is to let go of your old self and become a new person in Christ.