ENDORSEMENTS

John Kleinig invites readers to identify how shame has impacted their lives. He then engages them in a conversation, which is partly aimed at understanding shame but is mostly directed toward a single and recurring theme—Christ is our hope and our glory. As Kleinig puts it, "God's remedy for shame is not honor but glory." No quick fixes are offered, because no one plan fits for all the shamed. Rather, we are pointed to Christ, who engages with people "graciously and mercifully, respectfully and gently," and whose shame on the cross opens the pathway to glory.

—Andrew Pfeiffer, lecturer emeritus, Australian Lutheran College, Adelaide, South Australia

John Kleinig is not only an expert biblical exegete, dogmatician, and catechist, but is also, above all, a true *seelsorger*. His writings are simultaneously scholarly and accessible, a rare combination. This latest work is no exception. While tackling the central malaise of our fractured society, shame, he lavishes healing salve on broken hearts and souls in the shed blood of Christ Jesus and His merciful grace. Kleinig shows us, the walking wounded, how forgiveness and cleansing are dispensed in the sacred liturgy every Lord's Day, preparing us for the glories of the kingdom yet to come.

—Harold L. Senkbeil, author of *The Care of Souls* (Lexham, 2019) and *Dying to Live* (second edition; CPH, 2025); Waukesha, Wisconsin

# FROM SHAME TO GLORY

## GOD'S SURPRISING REMEDY FOR INJUSTICE & FAILURE

John W. Kleinig

To my dear sons, Timothy Kleinig and Paul Kleinig, in memory of my beloved father, Bernhard Kleinig, who had a well-tuned sense of shame and honor!

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# Preamble

Since I began to write this book on shame, something has changed in the casual conversations some people have with me. In the past, when people made polite conversation with me by asking what I was doing in my retirement and discovered I was spending much of my time writing on a religious topic, they seldom showed any interest in pursuing the discussion any further. But not now! The mere mention of shame often triggers a sudden jolt of interest and curiosity that stimulates further discussion. It is as if that word touches something largely ignored and yet significant to them. So much so that the conversation suddenly becomes personal and emotional—even, at times, confessional and spiritual. It is as if the usual social taboo on the discussion of personal issues and religious convictions has been lifted. Something important has been named. Something new is about to be discovered.

A recent encounter is a good example of this. When we offered hospitality to a homeless man last year, he wanted to know what I did for a living. After I told him that I was a retired pastor, he asked how I filled my time. I told him that I was writing a book on shame. At that, his eyes lit up. Then he sighed and said that if he were a

writer, he would write a book about his life as a story of shame. He had not done that. But, as time passed, we heard his complex story of shame and its impact on him.

In these encounters, I have noticed two things that have surprised me because they were so unexpected. On the one hand, the initial social interest in the topic changed to a sense of personal engagement as soon as I distinguished shame from guilt. The insight from that distinction seemed to open the door for people to understand their experience of shame. This happened, most of all, when I touched on shame from various kinds of abuse and personal failure. On the other hand, interest in the topic was not just restricted to a particular class of people, such as churchgoers or sexually abused women. It extended across the board from young to old, from Christians to atheists, from the well-educated to people with little education, and it included people of both sexes, all ethnicities, all social classes, and all occupations.

Even though the reasons for their personal interest in shame differed from person to person, case to case, and context to context, everybody seemed to stand on common ground with a similar sense about shame. Even so, despite all similarities, it was hard to generalize about their actual experience of shame, apart from its social orientation and its connection with the identity of each person. I have discovered that shame is so hard to pin down because it is so personal. Our sense of shame has to do with who we are, our unique identity despite our common humanity. We are all prone to shame in a different way, because each of us has been made as a unique person in God's image.

As I have been writing this book, I have been uncertain how to tackle the issue of shame respectfully and sensitively, in its full personal complexity, without sounding as if I were an expert on it, when my knowledge and awareness of it has come largely from my own experience as a person and a pastor. I have therefore run the first chapter of the book past people who I know well, to get feedback from them. In most cases, the response has been that my reflections have, as I had hoped, opened up the topic for them. It named something significant that had been previously unnamed and unexplained, something that they had not really noticed, let alone understood. It triggered a chain of reflection on shame and their own experience of it.

Let me mention just one recent instance of this. A few weeks ago, I shared the first chapter of this book with a young fellow pastor. After reading it, he said the topic of shame kept cropping up for him over and over again. In a short span of time, it came up in three different situations. First, he brought it up rather tentatively in a Bible study on 2 Timothy 1:1–14, where Paul tells young Pastor Timothy that, like Paul in prison in Rome, he had no reason to be ashamed of Jesus or of suffering for the Gospel. Prompted by what he had read, this pastor spoke about being shamed and asked why Timothy would be ashamed of his connection with Jesus and Paul. The Bible study led to an animated discussion of the participants' own experiences of shame from being rejected by friends and family for their convictions and commitment to God's Word. In this, they found that it was helpful to distinguish wrongful, misplaced shame from appropriate shame for doing something wrong or failing to fulfill a duty.

After that, the pastor visited a conscientious young man who was plagued with a bad conscience from his repeated failure to keep God's Law. The pastor was able to help the young man by distinguishing his guilt—with the need for confession and absolution—from his failure to meet the impossible expectations that he had set for himself. The pastor helped the young man to turn his attention away from himself and his self-esteem to Jesus, to ask Him to take away his shame as well as his guilt.

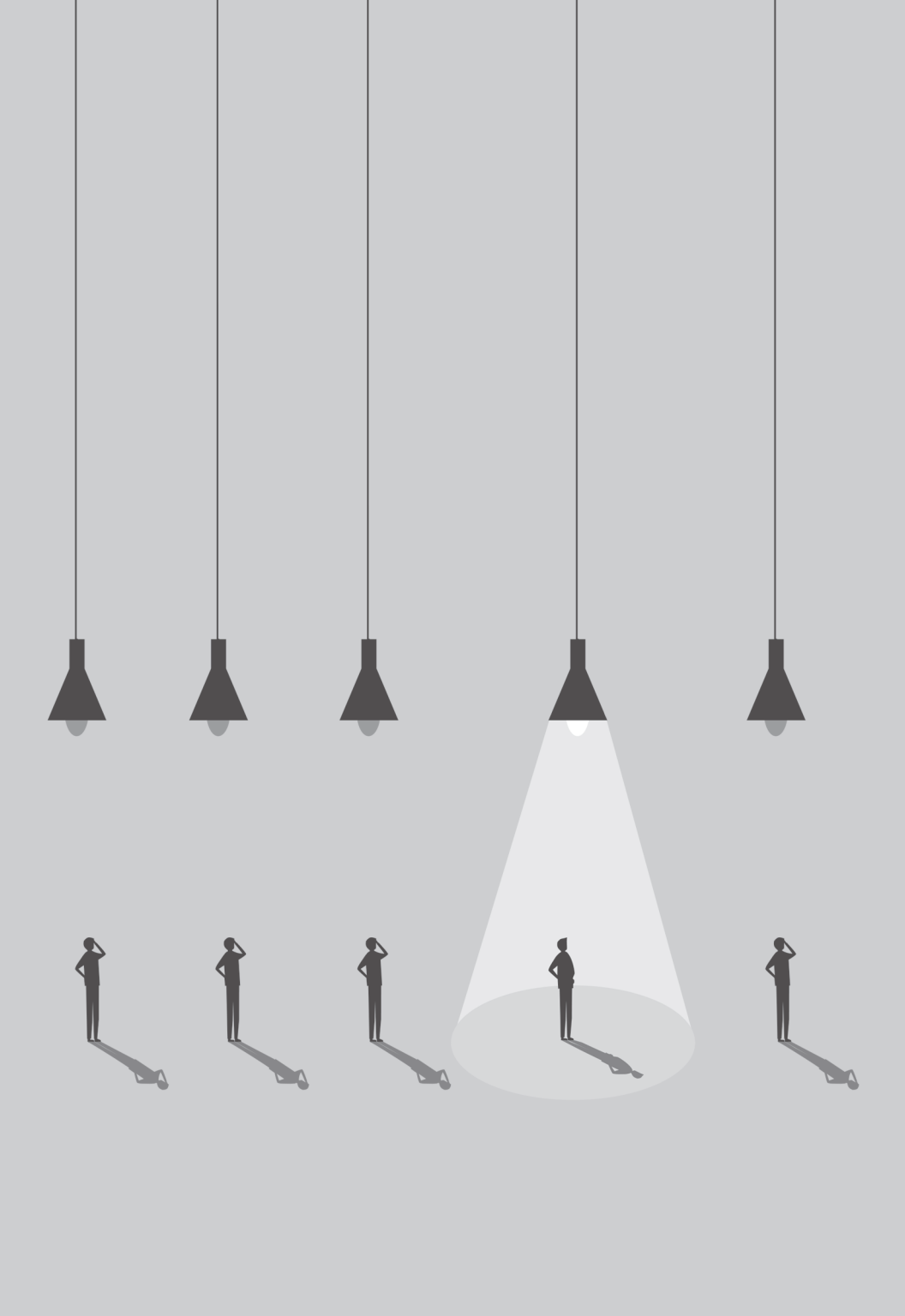
Then, soon after that, the pastor met with a woman who had left her abusive husband. Hiding behind a pious front, the husband had abused her emotionally for twenty years. Even though she had, with God's help, forgiven him, she still felt guilty, because she still felt as deeply hurt as ever by his abuse and could not forget how badly he had wounded her. The pastor suggested that her "guilt" could, in fact, be the shame that he had put on her by belittling and abusing her. That remark hit home for her and brought her to tears of relief. By naming her shame and distinguishing it from guilt, the pastor was able to help the woman to join with him in prayer that God would take away her shame and set her free from the deep, toxic hurt of her abuse by her husband.

These three cases deal with three different, common experiences of shame and its impact on the conscience. In each case, the pastor named the shame by distinguishing it from guilt.

My hope for you, as you read and study this book, is that it will help you to name the shame that you have experienced but may not yet have understood—or only partly understood, or even

misunderstood by confusing it with guilt—and will encourage you to look for relief from its burden and its impact on you.

But before you do that, I would invite you to consider whether, when, and how you yourself have been shamed, and how that has affected you. Begin where you are and discover where that takes you as you read this book.



CHAPTER ONE

# Naming Shame

The unjust knows no shame.

(Zephaniah 3:5)

If only I were such a blameless person that I would be rightly honored and admired because there was nothing wrong with either me or those who lived with me. I would then have nothing to hide and be quite happy to be openly seen as I am in body, soul, and spirit. Like Adam and Eve, I could be fully seen but not at all ashamed (Genesis 2:25). I would be rightly shameless.

We all know that this is an impossible dream. No matter how hard we try, we cannot change ourselves and our society so completely that we would have no need to be ashamed of ourselves and no longer be afraid that we would ever be shamed. In fact, the story of humanity seems to be an endless story of shame from generation to generation, shame that may be alleviated but is never eradicated.

Yet our lives need not end in disillusionment and disappointment. There is another story, a love story, the wonderful story of the promise of divine intervention and its amazing fulfillment. Its unexpected turn from shame to glory is summed up by Paul in Ephesians 5:25–27: "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up

for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." God's Son became a man and sacrificed Himself for us and the whole church to make us spotless and splendid, pure and holy in His sight. He has set us free from our guilt and shame by washing us completely clean in Baptism. Through faith in Him, we are now blameless and beyond reproach (Colossians 1:22). Through Him, we now no longer have any reason to be ashamed of ourselves because He covers us with His purity and holiness.

## A Journey of Discovery

It has taken me a long time to recognize what shame is and how it works; it has taken me even longer to realize how it has affected me in myself as well as in my relationship with others and God. Even though I have always felt its impact, mostly vaguely and sometimes acutely, I have not known what to make of it and how to deal with it. It lurks there in me and around me, unrecognized and unacknowledged, hidden in plain sight. Even though I don't know why, I fear public shaming as one of the worst things that could ever happen to me.

Despite my haunting sense of shame, I have been unable to deal with it for two main reasons. On the one hand, because shame has affected me psychologically, I have regarded it as little more than a negative emotional state that calls for better self-understanding to minimize its damage and, if that does not work, treatment by

a trained cognitive therapist. On the other hand, because shame is often associated with guilt and is similar in its effects, I have equated shame with guilt, both morally and theologically. That has enabled me to dismiss its effect without dealing with the reasons for it or finding a remedy for it. So, for example, when I was angry with people who had slandered me, I told myself that I needed to seek forgiveness from God for feeling angry with them and to forgive them for what they had done. But that did not deal with the shame they had inflicted on me. It did not identify the reason I felt such acute shame, nor did it release me from its grip. The hurt and anger from the words or actions remained.

My misunderstanding of shame and my confusion of shame with guilt have hampered me in my journey of emotional and spiritual discovery. They have prevented me from making sense of myself and my own experience. They have also stopped me from recognizing how I have shamed other people and have made it harder for me to work with people whom I have shamed. They have made me a slow learner, even though the fallout from shame was there for me to see in myself and the people around me. My misjudgment of myself has led me to misjudge others. It is a bit like what Jesus warns us about in Matthew 7:1–5. I could not see the speck in the eye of my brother, or sister, because I had a plank in my own eye. That plank prevented me from noticing what the Bible had to say about shame and helping people who had been shamed.

Broadly speaking, there have been three stages of gradual growth in my understanding of shame. From these, I have gained

some key insights into shame's social context, cultural formation, and spiritual dimension.

The first foundational stage in my understanding of shame came from my own social background. On both sides of my family, I belong to an ethnic minority here in Australia that has struggled to survive in an alien environment among a social majority that has disadvantaged and even persecuted us. My family belongs to a conservative Lutheran community of migrants who were Wends. Also known as Sorbs, Wends were a Slavic tribal group with its homeland east of the River Elbe on the border between present-day Germany and Poland. In the late Middle Ages, the Wends were taken over by German feudal overlords who treated them with disdain as uncivilized peasants and forced assimilation on them. But the Wends survived because their Lutheran heritage helped them to maintain their language, culture, and identity. In the early nineteenth century, many Wends migrated to Australia to escape religious discrimination and persecution in Prussia. Sadly, in Australia, they were identified with the German Lutheran settlers in South Australia during the two world wars and were persecuted along with them. The Wends in Australia suffered all kinds of public shaming because they were held to be German migrants.

Even though I grew up after the Second World War, I, like my Irish Catholic friends, was frequently reminded of my ambiguous status as a member of a different religious, ethnic community—a close-knit community that did not share the customs and values of the dominant English, Protestant majority who used the threat of shame to force assimilation as the price for social acceptance.

By their disapproval, they tried to make us feel ashamed of our ethnic identity and religious affiliation. Many Lutherans tried to remove their shame by changing their surnames and joining other "socially respectable" religious denominations. Even though I have tried to dismiss its significance, this record of public disapproval has left its mark on me. It has made me aware that my sense of shame has more to do with my social status than who I actually am and how I feel about myself.

The second stage in my cultural understanding of shame was triggered by my interaction with some Aboriginal Lutheran students from a remote, traditional community in North Queensland whom I prepared for confirmation as a college chaplain early in my ministry at a secondary boarding school in Brisbane. On a number of occasions, I overheard them mutter one to another, "Shame job!" and "No shame!" I eventually learned that the former exclamation was a warning to one of them about doing something that would be shameful and single them out for the disapproval of their fellow students. In contrast, the other exclamation was an assurance that what one of them had said or done had not or would not incur shame. These remarks stimulated me to investigate the place that respect and shame had in their culture. I discovered that they had an elaborate etiquette to avoid shaming others and to deal with shame when it occurred. So, for example, when I directed a question to a girl, the girl next to her would answer it. The second girl "covered" for the first so that she would not lose face by giving the wrong answer. This and many other similar experiences have

taught me much about shame and have helped me to understand its social significance.

The third decisive stage in my theological understanding of shame was stimulated by my pastoral care of people who had been severely abused: first, those who had been victims of sexual abuse, and then those who had been victims of other kinds of abuse. As I listened to these people, I discovered that, like the guilt from sin, the shame from abuse had given them a bad conscience. They felt unworthy and out of place in God's presence. No matter how much they tried, they could not pray. They stayed away from church and felt that they should not receive Holy Communion. Above all else, they felt unclean before God and condemned by Him. But they did not really know why. They thought that they must have done something wrong, because they felt so bad about themselves. They wondered whether they felt unworthy because they had done something wrong or whether God disapproved of them because they could not forgive those who had abused them. In my pastoral care of these people, I therefore learned to name shame as the main reason for their distress. I also learned to distinguish the shame that they felt as a result of the abuse they had experienced from the guilt they felt for other reasons, such as their desire for revenge.

Even though my awareness of shame has come from my personal experience, this book is not my story of its discovery. It is not about me at all. Rather, it is the story of God's help for all of us in our shame. In this book, I want to recall what God's Word teaches us about the origin of shame, its use and abuse, its effects and the fallout from it, and, most of all, about God's diagnosis of

it and remedy for it. Even though shame is immensely complex and very different in different contexts, the message of the Bible is quite simple. Like the Aboriginal students I taught long ago, God tells each of you who trust in Jesus, "No shame!" as He reaches out to free you from temporal and eternal shame. His promise is that whoever believes in Jesus will not be put to shame (Romans 9:33; 10:11; 1 Peter 2:6).

## The Nature of Shame

Like much of human behavior, shame is hard to define. Even though it affects us in all parts of our life—physically and socially, mentally and emotionally, personally and spiritually—we can't pin it down and tell exactly what it is. We can gauge its complexity from the way we speak about it. So, for example, we use the word *shame* to describe the following interrelated things:

- Physical shyness, modesty, reticence, and self-concealment
- Awareness of what is socially dishonorable, unpresentable, and unacceptable
- Discomfort and pain that is felt about something dishonorable and unacceptable in ourselves and others
- Disappointment from misplaced confidence in a person or a cause
- Embarrassment at public exposure and critical evaluation
- Hypersensitivity to censure and unjust rejection

- Abusive, hurtful acts by which others show their disapproval and rejection of us
- Social disgrace and reproach that results from public disapproval and rejection
- The effect of unjust disapproval and disgrace on how we feel about ourselves and our sense of worth
- The feeling of personal worthlessness and failure

Thus the same word covers a wide range of different and yet related personal things. It is hard to distinguish these from one another because they all describe what happens at the intersection of our private self-consciousness and our public status.

In simple terms, shame is the opposite of honor. Both are conferred and confirmed by others in the court of public opinion, a helpful modern term that describes their resemblance to the judgment of people in a court of law, which either vindicates or condemns them. The problem is that this "court" operates without an impartial, duly-authorized judge and objective code of law. The people who bring charges also belong to the jury that judges and sentences, and to the penal system that carries out the sentence. And that is what makes our sense of shame so precarious and uncertain.

While shame is much like guilt in some circumstances, it also differs significantly from it. I am guilty when I have done something wrong, done something that damages my relationship with others and God. Guilt comes from doing evil deeds, from breaking the law, whether it be the moral law or God's Law. My guilty conscience tells me that an evil deed needs to be rectified before the

breach in a relationship can be restored. The opposite of guilt is innocence. Guilty people seek to justify themselves by what they do and wish to be justified by the positive verdict of others on them.

In contrast with guilt, which makes me feel bad about what I have done, shame makes me see myself in a negative light, so that I regard myself as a bad person. When I am ashamed, I feel that I have failed as a person; I realize that there is something wrong with me; I feel that I am bad, a loser, or someone with no hope; I am not the person I should be or, even, that I would like to be. At its worst, shame discredits and disables me; it makes me feel unacceptable and insignificant, useless and worthless. So when I am shamed, I want to be vindicated.

The opposite of shame is honor. The shame that I feel is connected with my sense of self, my standing with others, my public face and acceptability, my reputation and social standing, the respect that I have or do not have in my community. It makes me aware of social approval and disapproval. With shame comes the loss of face, of how I present myself in public. While the approval of my colleagues honors me, their disapproval shames me.

My feeling that I am acceptable is damaged, diminished, and destroyed by five main causes: my wrongdoing to others, their abuse of me, my failure to be the person I would like to be or should be, my unacceptable status, and my self-deception. First, I feel guilty and ashamed of myself when I have done something wrong toward others, like stealing something that belongs to someone else. Second, I feel ashamed of myself when something bad is done to me,

such as when I have been sexually abused or bullied or slandered. Third, I feel ashamed of myself when I let myself and others down, such as if I fail an exam, lose my job, become bankrupt, or get divorced. Fourth, I feel ashamed of myself when I suffer disrespect for who I am or from what I am—my appearance or parentage, my race or ethnicity, my deficiencies and disabilities, my occupation or lack of employment, my sexual or marital status, my religious adherence or political convictions, and so on. Fifth, I am ashamed of myself when I realize that I have built my sense of self and my life on an idol, something unreal and untrue, a delusion, like a false ideology or a false creed with its set of wrong beliefs about the world, myself, and God.

Even though guilt and shame both affect us emotionally, shame is also felt physically, so much so that, like physical pain, it seems to be a physical sensation located in some parts of the body. Thus, when I am shamed, I blush from the rush of blood to my face that heats my cheeks. I also drop my face and avoid direct eye contact with other people for fear of their gaze and what it tells about their attitude toward me. I also close the posture of my body by lowering my head and dropping my shoulders, so that my hands and whole body become slack and withdrawn in a defensive demeanor. But those reactions can also turn from physical disengagement to a defiant posture and a heated sense of aggressive confrontation. We react to shame by flight from it or fight with those who have shamed us; this is often accompanied by a rush of adrenaline. Whatever the case, shame is as physical as it is emotional. It is a symptom of our personal and social embodiment.

Unlike guilt, shame is shared by others in many instances. While we as individuals feel guilty when we have done something wrong, we as a community are ashamed when our leaders or compatriots have done something shameful. Think of the shame of parents and a whole family when a child commits a crime or becomes an addict. Think of the shame of a sports team when its captain violates the rules of the game. Think of the shame of a congregation or a denomination when one of its leaders is found guilty of sexual impropriety or child abuse. Think of the shame of citizens when their leaders are found guilty of gross negligence, severe corruption, or a blatant crime. Think of the shame of a nation such as the United States from the approval of slavery by their ancestors, or Australia from the mistreatment of its original inhabitants. Think of the shame that many of us feel about the legalization of abortion and euthanasia. In all these cases, people are ashamed of something bad that they themselves have not done. They bear and share a common sense of shame. They suffer from shame by their association with others who have done something shameful. While guilt is personal, shame is also communal, social, and national. A whole community may also be shamed by institutional injustice and systemic oppression.

Thus, in the Old Testament, God's people were put to shame by what their leaders did. They were all shamed when their national enemies defeated them in battle, enslaved their captured soldiers as prisoners of war, deported their leaders, occupied their land, and oppressed its remaining inhabitants. And even worse than that, they were put to shame by their triumphant enemies, who

taunted them and their God for their impotence and inability to defend themselves.

Like guilt, shame is not in itself a bad thing. A healthy sense of shame is an essential part of life for people in a well-ordered, harmonious community. It is associated with their proper sensitivity to the people around them in their interaction with them and their respect for them. It has to do with the decency and courtesy that is shown in politeness and good manners. It guards their inner self, their self-esteem, and assures them of their respectability, their place in society. But despite the riches of our English vocabulary, we do not have a word for this good sense of shame and its proper use. The best noun that I know is the old-fashioned word *modesty* as the honest self-awareness by which we do not make too much or too little of ourselves and our social status. The verb that best describes a good use of shaming is *admonish*. It is used for wise, respectful instruction in constructive behavior and the kind, gentle correction of destructive activity.[1] It encourages what is consistent with the welfare of a person and warns against the damage done by disrespectfulness.

A positive sense of shame is divinely given, God's good gift to us by our creation in His image, something latent and inherent in our humanity. Positively speaking, it is closely associated with the personal modesty and humility that comes from the awareness of our worth with God and dependence on Him for our identity. It shields our personal integrity and protects our honor. So, shame

1 See the use of the Greek verb νουθετέω (admonish) by Paul in Acts 20:31; Romans 15:14; 1 Corinthians 4:14; Colossians 1:28; 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 14; 2 Thessalonians 3:15; and its noun νουθεσία (admonition) in 1 Corinthians 10:11; Ephesians 6:4; Titus 3:10.

and honor belong together; they correspond with each other, like the two sides of the same coin. Shame shows us how God sees our shortcomings. As such, it turns on us when we reject Him. Since we were meant to live in community with one another and with Him, shame shows us that we, like Adam and Eve, have fallen out with Him and are far from His glory; we become ashamed of ourselves and cover up before God and one another because we do not measure up to God's expectation of us. Thus, shame is an index of our standing with others and God.

## A New Challenge

Shame is at work all around us. Even though it is often unacknowledged, it motivates all of us personally and socially, because we all live in community together. It is at play everywhere people work together and personally interact. It is most evident in public life and politics.

Let me mention two common instances of it. We see it at work in the pressure that teenagers feel from their peers as they move away from their families in search of their place in an adult world. Since they are uncertain about themselves and their worth, they crave approval from others their age. For them, the price of recognition and acceptance in their social circle is conformity to a dominant group, with its behavior, dress, and values. Those who do not join in with it are disparaged and shunned. They are shamed into acquiescence and compliance. Peer group leaders manipulate their followers to gain and retain power over them. Since the members of the group wish to gain peer acceptance and approval, they risk

greater but later shame to avoid the smaller but present shame from ridicule and rejection.

We see it too in our need to find a place for ourselves in society, whether it be at school, work, sport, or anywhere else. Our place, our standing, depends largely on the approval of the leaders, the people in charge who assess us and our performance, the managers who have the power to reward us and promote us. They use our desire for recognition and our fear of shame to motivate us. Our reputation is also tested and confirmed by interaction with our colleagues. There we learn proper social intelligence and respectful behavior. There we discover how to disagree with others without belittling them. There we come to appreciate the value of honest loyalty and the protection provided by others who cover for us. There the healthy interplay of honor and shame shapes us and produces a positive sense of shame through acceptance and approval.

Even though the use of shame to produce social cooperation and encourage personal compliance is nothing new, it has been adapted and reshaped by the internet via cellphones and other digital devices. This visual and verbal means of interaction and communication has been widely adopted, for both better and worse, by what is now called social media. So, for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to stay in touch with people around the world and deliver lectures to many different groups via Zoom without actually visiting them.

At its worst, social media has provided a new powerful weapon for politicians, culture warriors, and social activists who use it to

attack and ridicule their opponents with impunity. Think of how political candidates for public office in the United States and elsewhere have ridiculed their rivals and defamed them with their postings and tweets. Also think of the Me Too movement, with its tactic of naming and shaming real or alleged male sexual offenders.

The use of social media has shown how pervasive the fear of being shamed is in our society and how desperate people are for attention and significance, recognition and approval. Consider the widespread appeal and surprising success of Facebook. It is aptly named because it offers its users a public "face" with its selfie pictures and personal postings. Yet its appeal goes well beyond mere recognition. By its solicitation of likes and dislikes, it establishes a virtual community of friends and followers. But it also plays on the deep-seated fear of disapproval by cancellation and rejection by "unfriending." It has created a digital culture that is based on honor and shame.

The influence of social media has alerted us to the power of shame. It has shown us how public shaming damages people. Think, for example, of the young people who have been driven to suicide by ridicule and visual caricatures of their physical appearance! Yet despite the crude exploitation of shame to damage vulnerable people, we should not conclude that our sense of shame is bad. It is not something that we need to eliminate if we want to thrive and live well with other people. When it works as it should, shame defends our honor and protects us from the peril of shamelessness.

## Shamelessness

A healthy sense of shame is an invaluable asset. It is God's good gift to us by our creation in His image for fellowship with Him and one another. It is latent in our humanity. It is an essential aspect of our self-consciousness. Yet, like all God's good gifts, it can be mistaken and misused. If it functions properly, it is useful and helpful, like a fire alarm or a stomachache. It is essential to our personal and spiritual health and growth. We cannot live at peace without it, because it shows us how we are regarded by others and God. It shows us that our sense of self and our worth depends on God and His approval of us. Just as our guilt tells us that we have done something wrong, our shame tells us that there is something wrong with us, like Bartimaeus with his blindness (Mark 10:46–52) and the woman with her pollution by the continuous menstrual discharge of blood (Luke 8:43–48).

If we had no sense of shame, we would be largely insensitive to others and unaware of what is required from us in our relationship with them. We would, in fact, be narcissistic sociopaths with no capacity for friendship and love. A sense of shame, like our desire for approval, is part and parcel of our creation for life in community with others. Just as we would be foolish to rid ourselves of people who have hurt us, so we would be even more foolish to eliminate our sense of shame and refuse to learn from it. We do not need to free ourselves from shame but to have it refined so that broken relationships can be restored. Shame is meant to be a good friend, not a bad enemy.

I admit that the positive value of shame may be rather hard to grasp. It is, I think, best understood by its contrast with the destructive impact of shamelessness. That is much worse than the hurt we suffer from the most shameful kinds of abuse and the worst kinds of failure. Eliminating our sense of shame would be like overcoming pain by desensitizing our nervous system.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God compares His bride, the city of Jerusalem, to a brazen prostitute with this sad lament in 3:3: "You have the forehead of a whore; you refuse to be ashamed." Then a little later, in 8:8–12, He has this to say about the careless shamelessness of its religious leaders:

[8]How can you say, "We are wise,
and the law of the LORD is with us"?
But behold, the lying pen of the scribes
has made it into a lie.
[9]The wise men shall be put to shame;
they shall be dismayed and taken;
behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD,
so what wisdom is in them?
[10]Therefore I will give their wives to others
and their fields to conquerors,
because from the least to the greatest
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.
[11]They have healed the wound of My people lightly,
saying, "Peace, peace,"

when there is no peace.
*12*Were they ashamed when they committed abomination?[2]
No, they were not at all ashamed;
they did not know how to blush.[3]

Shame has to do with our face-to-face interaction with the people around us. It is on display physically with our faces and what they communicate visually by attention and reaction to other people. In public, we read one another's faces, and those faces often tell us much more than what their owners say verbally. Shame is shown by how we look at others and how we react when others look at us. Thus, when we are ashamed, we either avoid eye contact with people or else blush with embarrassment at their gaze. We are ashamed to be seen by them. We can also, if we wish, cover our shame by putting on a brazen face that defies censure and disapproval. That is what shameless people do with their personal demeanor, which says in effect, "I don't care what you think of me, because you don't count for me at all."

Jeremiah reads the faces of the religious leaders in Jerusalem—the scribes, priests, and prophets who ridicule him and reject what God says to them through him. He sees that they no longer know how to blush because they have switched off their ears to God's voice and shut their hearts to His Law because it has exposed their sin. They therefore use God's Word to justify their sin and excuse their shamelessness. Their deliberate misapplication and distortion of God's Word desensitizes them spiritually, emotionally, and

2 In Jeremiah 23:14, God laments that the prophets in Jerusalem not only justified their own adultery but also excused the evildoing of the people by their false teaching.
3 Jeremiah 8:10b–12 recalls 6:13–15.

physically, so much so that they no longer know how to blush. They have lost their physical and mental, moral and spiritual compass.

Their descent into shamelessness and the fallout from it stemmed not from their ignorance of God's Law but from their familiarity with it. In their greed for assets and wealth, they abused their God-given status in order to cheat their poor, disadvantaged fellow citizens and manipulate the courts of law to escape punishment for what they had done. They used their knowledge of God's Law to justify their unjust exploitation and excuse their perversion of justice. Then they covered up their ungodly self-deception by using God's Word to preach false peace to other evildoers rather than by healing through repentance and reliance on His pardon.

They embraced three kinds of shamelessness. First, they did what they knew was shameful in God's eyes. Then they twisted God's Word to excuse their wrongdoing and justify their actions to themselves and others. Then, last and worst, they used their expertise and prestige to excuse and sanction the sins of others. By their personal shamelessness, they promoted even worse public shamelessness. This shamelessness was so ingrained that God announces that, as His last resort for them, He will put them to shame by the conquest of Jerusalem and their deportation by its conquerors as prisoners of war far from their homeland.

## A Dark Maze

Like most other personal matters, shame needs to be understood specifically rather than abstractly, particularly rather than

generally. It needs to be distinguished from similar, related things, like depression or low self-esteem, by being named accurately in its actual social context. But that is a hard thing for us to do. For me personally, I know it is hard because my sense of shame is so much a part of me as a whole person and my whole life. It is so close to me that I can't see it properly, like the birthmarks on my back. It is very much like my face, which I can see only in parts, like my nose, or in a blurry outline. Like a person who is blind, I need to have it named by others to see it for myself.

All too often, shame makes me feel like I am in a dark maze in which I try to find my way by myself at night with the help of a little candle but without a map or any signposts. I can see where I am, but I don't know where that is in the whole maze. I don't know how to find my way through it, because there are so many false paths and dead ends. Like getting lost in a maze, my understanding of shame is rather confused and confusing for three mains reasons.

The first reason for confusion is social and cultural. While shame is at work in all societies, some societies are better equipped culturally to identify it and deal with it, such as the traditional Aboriginal people in Australia that I mentioned earlier. Sociologists call these "shame cultures," and these include such people as the tribal communities in Africa or the traditional monarchy of Japan. These are in contrast with "guilt cultures," like western European societies with their Protestant heritage. Each of these cultures has its own social mentality and moral code of conduct that makes them understand the same things differently from other cultures. So people like me with my religious heritage usually assess

wrongdoing legally, according to innocence or guilt, rather than socially, according to honor and shame. We therefore are often ill-equipped mentally and culturally to handle shame, because our culture obscures it by equating it with guilt or the loss of personal self-esteem. So even when we name it, we don't name it correctly. We are, by and large, blind to our own sense of shame, even when we are experts at shaming people.

The second reason for confusion is personal. Even though we can usually name the people who have shamed us, we find it hard to see and understand shame properly in our own behavior, because it has to do with our own being, our personal identity, our souls, our whole sense of self as persons. Shaming attacks us personally and treats us as if we were nonentities, nameless nobodies. It threatens to cancel me, to negate me as a person. Even if the injury is not consciously intended, that is how it feels when I am uncertain about myself and my status. So, the more uncertain I am about myself and my own worth, the more demeaning, devastating, and destructive shaming is. Unless I have a secure sense of self, shaming presents an existential threat to me by calling into question my right to exist. The outer attacks on me trigger an ongoing inner conflict in me, a desperate battle to maintain my sense of worth and vindicate myself in the face of rejection and condemnation. And that clouds my perception and distorts my judgment.

The third reason for confusion is emotional. The experience of shame evokes some powerful and toxic human emotions, such as indignation, anger, and rage against an injustice; hostility, hatred, malice, spite, and vindictiveness against the offender; and

bitterness, resentment, and self-reproach from the offense. And these emotions are expressed to an extreme degree of intensity—so much so that the emotional reaction to the offense seems to be disproportionate, exaggerated, and unwarranted to the onlooker. Yet that is how it is for a shamed person. The deeper the personal hurt and the worse the injustice, the more extreme the emotional fallout from the offense.

When these emotions are bottled up and repressed, as they usually are, they feed on one another and increase in their intensity, like water in a pressure cooker, until they explode. Then all that is needed is the right trigger for them to erupt in a torrent of verbal abuse and an outburst of physical violence. While the outburst can be triggered by anybody at hand, it is focused in general on all those who have shamed the person and, in particular, on the worst offender, who somehow embodies the hurt. As we so often see in the Psalms, they are "my enemies" and the worst of them is "the enemy." So the emotional impact of unjust abuse makes it hard to name the shame calmly and dispassionately or to distinguish person from person and case from case, the cause of each incident from its outcome, and the effect of the worst offenses from their total damage. It is all too much, all too confused and confusing, to be named by dispassionate analysis and explanation. The best shamed people can do is to say how they feel, and why, to a patient, sympathetic, compassionate listener who encourages them to name the shame by pouring out their hearts emotionally and graphically, as is done in the Psalms.

## The Hope of Glory

I am writing this book at a time when the topic of shame is suddenly and surprisingly on the agenda in the public domain in countries like Australia and the United States. It has in the past received scant attention in the Western world and been largely ignored in its churches. But now it is evident in many different ways and many different places, from the family to the workplace, schools to politics, the church to the courts of law, the arts to television, and elsewhere. There are many reasons for this, but I will not explore them here, and I am ill-equipped to explore them because I am not a psychologist or a sociologist or a cultural analyst but a pastor and theologian.

My aim is to help you examine your experience of shame, understand it better, and discover how your sense of shame is bound up with who you are. I also want to encourage you to look for something greater and far better than your honor and self-esteem. My purpose is summed up in two simple phrases from the apostle Paul in Colossians 1:27: "the riches of the glory"[4] and "the hope of glory."[5] This is reflected in the title of this book. I had originally intended to write about shame and honor. But that has changed with my surprising discovery that God's remedy for shame is not honor but glory. It is not His affirmation of me as I am in myself but as I am as His child and heir in Jesus. It is not His restoration of my honor but my participation in His glory through my union with Him.

4 See also Romans 9:23; Ephesians 1:18; 3:16; Philippians 4:19.
5 See also Romans 5:2.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Is there anything in this chapter that you would like to discuss?

2. What recent examples of public shaming have you noticed?

3. In what ways have you or someone close to you been severely damaged by shame? How?

4. Reflect on the difference between shame and guilt, and discuss why it is helpful to make this distinction.

5. In what ways is our sense of shame beneficial to us in our relationship with others and God?

6. Which emotions increase our shame? Which emotions cloud our understanding of it? How?