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The Journey through Shame

Genesis 2:25-3:13

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There is a dark threat woven into the fabric of my life, and it has brought destruction to me and my relationships—and it's a master of disguise. It does its most sinister work when it's outside my awareness, and the threat is shame. All of us experience it, and we're all certainly affected by it but shame can be difficult to recognize and know how to process in a healthy way. So how do we become aware of it and then travel through it?

As we explore that this morning, it's helpful to understand that shame encompasses all kinds of things. It can be a feeling of embarrassment. It can be something that people place on us because they're disappointed with us. It can be found in dark words that stung our hearts as children. It lives in our family systems and in our schools and in our jobs. It can be something that we experience if we're a victim of a crime and it can happen when we offend someone and they want to use shame to punish us. Although I wish I had time this morning to cover the wide swath of shame, I want to focus specifically on one aspect of it, and that is shame when we do something we know is wrong. How do we travel through that kind of shame in a healthy way?

We find the answers in the great story of humanity. In Genesis, chapter 2, verse 25, the story begins in a garden, the Garden of Eden, where we see the first human relationship, and this relationship is incredible! The narrator actually interrupts the story to tell us something about it and we learn that:

> **Adam and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame.** (*NIV, Genesis 2:25)

They are fully real and relationally vulnerable with each other. There are no masks; there is no hiding and they experience relationship without any shame. Why did the author take time to highlight the lack of a specific emotion in the first human relationship? Why say that they had **no shame**? Love and relationship without any shame is something astoundingly beautiful, but all beautiful things have an enemy and this enemy rages against all that brings glory to God. Satan is hell bent on destroying every relationship and human who is made in the image of God. Toxic shame is one of his greatest weapons. Satan wants Adam and Eve to rebel and live apart from God, and from there he wants to destroy them on the path of toxic shame. The way Satan does this thing is brilliant as we see in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 1:

> **Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made.** (Vs. 1a)

The serpent here is Satan and we're told that he is **crafty**, so we need to pay really close attention to see what he's up to in this conversation with Eve.

> **He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"**

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Vs. 1b-5)

Here Satan uses a specific title for God. He calls God *Elohim*, or simply *God*, and this is a different title from that used in the rest of this story. *Jehovah Elohim*, or *Lord God*, is used in all of chapter two and then again when God enters the story in Genesis, chapter three, verse eight and following. Lord God is the name that highlights God's nearness, that He is a covenant partner who is very personal and close and wants an intimate relationship with us. God or Elohim , the title that Satan uses, is a name that is less personal. It highlights the God who is above us, who created the world with the utterance of His word, who was holy, set apart, so different from us that He's the only one who can stand as judge. All of these descriptions about God are true, but then Satan throws in a lie. Perhaps, Satan suggests, God is also secretive, wants to restrict people. Maybe God isn't good. Satan here is messing with Eve's view of God, and in this moment he wants her to think of God as only distant, non-personal. Satan certainly doesn't say, "Hey, I see there's some confusion here. Why don't we go to God and get this thing clarified." No, Eve must remain distant from God and Eve takes Satan's bait and uses the same title for God in her whole conversation with the serpent. "Yeah, maybe God is distant, secretive, restricting."

Satan's methods have not changed. He still works destruction in our lives by messing with our view of God, and this is one way we can know if we're on the path of toxic shame. It will always include a distorted view of God, something inaccurate about Him, and this inaccuracy keeps us bound to the harmful shame. "*Satan is a liar and the father of lies,"* and the most powerful lies are those that are built on half-truths. They stick a lot longer. So to release toxic shame, Satan will offer us lies that include part-truths about God. It's as if Satan takes Van Gogh's incredible starry-night painting and he cuts out a small section of the painting, takes it to another room, puts it on a wall for display and then walks us in and presents it to us as if it were the full painting. We see part of the real thing but we miss the breathtaking whole. If you feel shame when you think of God as the all powerful judge, Satan wants you to focus on that to the exclusion of God's nearness and His grace.

This is my story. I knew that God loved me but the image of God that burned the brightest in my heart, in my mind, was the one part of the painting that Satan wanted me to focus on, what he wanted me to see—mostly lies and a little bit of truth. I thought of God as the all powerful judge but He was distant and angry and ready to strike me down. If He did get a little close to me, I felt like He was at least slightly disgusted with me and it kept me in toxic shame. God's amazing grace was my cure and it would correct my distorted view of God and it would heal my shame. So as long as I didn't see or embrace God's grace, Satan was happy.

So one way we can fight toxic shame is to ask God to remind us of the whole painting, to help us see Him as He is, to view Him in all His fullness, to break through the lies that we might believe about Him and for many of us that will include a deeper understanding of His grace. Sometimes the lies we believe about God are so embedded that we need others to help us see it. What if you invited others into your story to help you see the lies that you might believe in your shame? What if you sat

down and opened up the Bible and asked God to help you see it? Doing things like this will begin to fight the toxic shame in our lives.

Our story continues in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 6:

> **When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.** (Vs. 6-7)

In an act of rebellion, Adam and Eve eat the fruit which God forbids. They were free of shame; now they feel the awkward emotion of shame for the very first time, and this is a specific type of shame. The moral compass inside them tells them that they have sinned. They want this uncomfortable feeling to go away and so they desperately try something—they hide. The results are devastating for their relationship. Beautiful vulnerability is replaced by masks. The place of being fully known and still fully loved begins to fade away, and the same attempt to cover shame is found in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 10: When Adam meets God,

> **He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."**

The emotion of fear is powerful. Like Adam, we are afraid that when we show our true selves, we will no longer be loved, especially when we show our broken or shadow side, and so we hide. Hiding can include things like cutting ourselves off from relationship with God or others. Hiding can also look like good behavior and this one has certainly been true for me. I feel shame before God because I sin, and in order to hide my shame, I distance myself from God and try really hard to live a good life. I think if I do this long enough, I'll be clean enough to come back into God's presence. If you were to look at my life, you'd say, "Hey, he's doing pretty good, living a pretty good life," but it's only a nice-looking attempt to cover my shame and it drives me to further isolation from God and others. I mean how can I take off the clean-life mask and let you really see who I am? I'm afraid you will no longer accept me or love me. Is it possible that some of you are like me? You have tried to cover your shame with good-living, holy-living? When we do this, we only feed our toxic shame. We lose precious vulnerability with God and with others.

One of the current leading researchers on shame, Brené Brown, did a ten-year study on the greatest factors known to fight harmful shame, and you know what she found? Shame shrivels in safe places where we can be real and vulnerable with others, and God already knew that this was part of the cure for our toxic shame. At the beginning of time, as we see in Genesis chapter 3, verse 8:

> **Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"** (Vs. 8-9)

God's first question to Adam is, "You idiot, how could you do this?" No, his first question is, "Where are you?" and this is not asking for his physical location. God already knows that. He's asking them to look inside. He's asking them, "What are your internal thoughts and feelings right now? I'm here; I love you, and I want to connect with you. I will journey this thing through, and I

invite you to be real with Me. I'm willing to be vulnerable with you, to open Myself to love, to the possibility of being hurt, even to the point of death for you. God invites us to a vulnerable, personal relationship with Him and it's in this place that we can find healing for our sin and our shame that harms us. Have you answered His invitation, and if you haven't, what is keeping you from moving into His open arms?

In this section of the story we also see a powerful message about our identity. God sought us out. We are God's pursued ones who are worthy of His pursuit. You are God's pursued one, worthy of His pursuit and even as I say that, some of us are saying right now, "No, that can't be! You don't know me and you don't know my darkness." Please, please don't listen to that script. It's a message from toxic shame. Even with your darkness in everything that you do and everything you will do, you are still God's pursued one, worthy of His pursuit.

God spends a lot of time in Scripture reminding us of who we are. Let's soak it in. We need it. We desperately need it to fight against the scripts of shame that we hear every single day! In his excellent book *The Soul of Shame,* Curt Thompson imagines shame as a personal attendant. This personal attendant hangs out with us everywhere we go, but they are not there to help us with our life. They are there to harm us and they do this by judging every part of our life and then telling us a destructive message about it. So we look in the mirror and our personal attendant tells us that we are not attractive enough. We make a mistake and our attendant tells us we are not smart enough and on and on it goes. "You're not good enough and you're not talented enough." All of us have personal attendants telling us we are not "blank" enough. Fill in the blank for your life, and it's not just that. These messages attack our identity. For instance, we might do something we know is wrong and at that moment we think, "I am bad," which is a statement about our identity, instead of, "I did something bad," which is about our behavior. Some labels might help us understand the difference here. Shame is about identity, "I *am* bad." Guilt is about behavior, "I *did* something bad." God doesn't use shame but he can use guilt. He doesn't shame us by throwing shameful titles at our identity in order to correct us or help us grow. God doesn't do that, but he can use our sense of guilt—the fact that we did something wrong to get our attention, to correct us and get us back on the right path. All of us are sinners who have done and will do bad things and in that sense we are guilty, but this is no longer our identity in Christ. We are given a new identity.

The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, lists all kinds of sins but then he says this in verse 11: "*And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."*

In Christ, God now gives us new titles of who we are, like *Son and Daughter of God* and *Redeemed One*. As powerful as these new titles are from God, they are still attacked by messages of shame, and a lot of times harmful messages about our identity come to us from our childhoods. Those over us, even if they had good intentions, may have fed us scripts that said, "You are bad," to try to correct our behavior. So when you enter shame, what message are you hearing? If it targets your identity, it's harmful shame. If it draws attention to your behavior, it's possible God wants to use it and we see how God does this in Genesis chapter 3, verse 11:

> **And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"**

In the story God has still not asked the "what" question, "What have you done?" He started with, "Where are you?" an invitation into vulnerability and relationship. Now he asks, "**Who told you that you were naked?"** This is another invitation to deep relationship from God, and a beautifully vulnerable answer from Adam would be something like, "You know, God, I don't know who told me I was naked. I just somehow know that I'm now naked and I feel afraid. I feel confused and I've done exactly what you told me not to do and I'm hiding from You but I don't want to hide from You. Will You please help me? Will You journey this thing through with me?" But that is not what Adams says. There is silence; Adam is still hiding. Knowing the heart of God, I don't think He asked these questions rapidly in judgment, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree?" No, He wants relationship, dialogue, and for Adam to open up. This vulnerability will begin to heal his harmful shame, so God pauses for a long time after the first question. Since Adam won't engage, God asks him a more direct question, "**Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"** God loves Adam and Eve too much to leave them where they are. He wants to lead them on the path of healing and life, and to do this, notice that God says nothing about Adam's identity. He does not say, "You rebellious idiot, have you eaten?" No, no he attempts to guide Adam to acknowledge his broken behavior. He knows that this is the way of healing and life, and if Adam would confess his sin—agree with God about his behavior and then invite God in to redeem it—that is the path of life. Adam's moral guide within him tells him he has sinned and he's feeling guilt, and God is saying, "Listen to that. It will tell you when you stray. I will help you know when you sin and when you fail, come running to me."

"*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*." *(1 John 1:9)*

"Therefore, let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace so that we need may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

Guilt can help us know when we sin. We then acknowledge our behavior, agree with God that we've sinned, and ask Him to help us get back on the right path. We then run to God and we reconcile with others. This is a healthy thing. But we can also respond in an unhealthy way as we see in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 11: God asks,

> **Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"**
>
> **The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."** (Vs. 11b-12)

Adam shifts the blame, outright blames Eve. He also implies that God is to blame for giving him Eve. He even seems to try to shame God by saying, *"...the woman you gave me."* Once again harmful shame rears its ugly head, and this pushes Adam further away from God and from Eve. God lovingly tries to get Eve to acknowledge her behavior and she shifts the blame and responses similarly in Genesis chapter 3, verse 13:

> **Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" and the woman said, "The serpent deceived me and I ate."**

I see myself in Adam and Eve's responses. When I become aware of my sin, my knee-jerk response is to try to shift the blame on to others or try to justify my actions. But with God's help, we can do

something different. We can own our stuff and come to God without casting shame or blame on others, and in doing that, we will travel the path of healing and life.

Perhaps this conversation has stirred something in you. You know that harmful shame exists in your life. You're just not exactly sure how to travel through it. It's okay; I'm right there with you. Toxic shame continues to attack me and my story, and I feel the fear of uncovering old wounds or taking off the mask and actually letting people see who I really am, seeing my brokenness at times. I'm tempted to try to take care of my shame and cover it all on my own but I know I can't. I can't and none of us can. Run to God; ask Him to help you. Talk to him about your brokenness. He knows it all anyway and He still loves you...absolutely loves you! Talk with someone you trust. Maybe it's a friend or a family member or perhaps you'd enjoy connecting with our Spiritual Care Ministry here after the service or you could set an appointment up later on. Any of us on staff would love to journey with you as well. We will put a few additional resources on the Lincoln Berean Facebook page as well, if you want to see a few more articles and books on this subject so you can understand more of what toxic shame is doing in our lives. But together—together by God's grace—we do not have to allow toxic shame to isolate us or harm us. There is life and there is a way to healthfully process harmful shame. Will you pray with me?

Oh, God, toxic shame, it harms all of our lives. We've struggled with messed-up views of You and of ourselves. Would You please help us? Help us to see the lies that we're believing. Help us to see ourselves as You see us and believe it, not just in our mind but in the depths of our hearts. Give us courage to invite You and others into our story. Help us find those people who are safe, that we can be vulnerable and real with. Help us not to hide, to run, or to try to cover our shame on our own. But if we do feel guilt, Father, that You would help us to run into Your loving arms, that we would approach Your throne of grace with confidence. We would not run from You; we would run to You, and thank You for loving us in the middle of our mess and our brokenness. Lead us on the path of life, for Your glory and honor. Amen.

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