



feature

from shame to honour

grace and healing following
sexual abuse

There have been many times in my life when I have felt the crushing weight of shame. The most prevailing issue for me, though, is living with a history of sexual abuse as a child and then being raped twice as a young adult.

Memories and nightmares have intermingled over the years so I can't pinpoint exactly what happened when, but I am certain that at the age of eight or nine there was sexually inappropriate behaviour by a family friend, someone who attended our church even.

Up until that point I had led a very sheltered life, and when the abuse happened I didn't understand that it was inappropriate. What I do know is that something was wrong. But because I was told that I was the naughty one, and because I'd been raised to respect adults, I believed that I really had done something bad even if I couldn't put my finger on exactly what. I was also conditioned by some very perverse lies to keep my silence – and so I did.

There was great confusion at this stage in my life, but also the beginnings of shame, even though I wasn't quite sure what I was ashamed about. It wasn't until the age of about eleven or twelve that I started to understand more of not just what sex is, but

what is and isn't appropriate, that things started in a real downwards spiral.

Initially my brain blocked the memories of that part of my life – when I was asked anything about what happened in my junior school years there was just a haze and I had to divert the conversation to stop people realising I had no memory. But there was fear, guilt and shame in a tangle of emotions. My self-harming behaviour escalated, which heaped on more guilt and shame. Each time I cut, I started having dissociative fugue states and incredibly turbulent emotions, which led to multiple suicide attempts.

I isolated myself from my peers at school, church and youth group. Then, at the age of about 16, snippets of memory became clearer again and slowly I started to piece together an outline of what must have happened. But that only led to even worse mental states, particularly depression, anxiety and dissociation.

Eventually I worked up the courage to tell a member of my healthcare team, a physiotherapist. I thought that telling someone would help me, but I didn't realise that my physio was duty-bound to report what I had disclosed. This 'betrayal', as I perceived it, made me feel even more insecure.

My physio was so patient with me, despite me being quite nasty to her for a while, but eventually I 'forgave' her.

I was encouraged to seek specialist psychological therapy through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, but I simply wasn't ready for that just then. The hurt I went through as a child led to patterns of behaviour that left me vulnerable and they led, in part, to me ending up in situations where I was raped twice more as a young woman.

Praise God, I had heard and accepted the gospel at a young age. Even so, it took me many years to 'allow' God into the deepest, darkest, messiest parts of my heart and help me be 'rid of my disgrace', to use the words of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13, and to allow myself both to forgive and to accept God's forgiveness myself.

God is merciful and offers grace in our hour of need

I want to outline, briefly, how grace transforms us from shamed sinners to honoured saints.

Shame

How can we define shame? There are many ways, but one I find that most resonates with me is by Ed Welch:¹ 'You are disgraced because

you acted less than human, you were treated as if you were less than human, or you were associated with something less than human, and there are witnesses.'

There are many images we can call to mind when we think on shame, such as:

- Defiled
- Unlovable
- Worthless
- Contaminated
- Outsider
- Naked
- Unclean
- Filthy
- Repulsive
- Rejected
- Vile
- Exposed
- Scorned
- Dishonoured
- Dirty
- Disgraced

There is also a public nature to shame, whereas our guilt can often be hidden. When you are ashamed you feel as if the dirtiest parts of you are exposed for all to see, and for all to judge.

And then, after a while, you start confessing things that aren't your fault:

- You feel responsible for being the target of someone else's contempt or anger
- You feel responsible for being rejected by other people
- You feel guilty for being alive...
- For being born...
- Simply for being²

STATISTICS ON ABUSE IN THE UK

Despair

Shame can very easily lead to despair, even in the Christian, but especially in those who don't know the forgiveness and freedom Christ offers and have no hope in heaven. For me personally, shame was a significant contributing factor in feeling suicidal. Part of my way to combat this despair was to:

- Understand God's Word better
- Accept forgiveness in Christ (rather than go to the cross with my shame then just haul my 'baggage' back with me)
- Pray through my shame rather than just trying to hide it

Please be aware that some people experiencing despair (be they your patient, your friend, or even yourself) may need specialist psychiatric input to help them stay safe. But also know that psychiatry and psychology rarely deal with our deepest needs, our spiritual needs. That is why the body of the church and the intercessions of the saints play a vital role in a person's 'recovery'. Let the person experiencing shame and despair know that God always heard their cry, and responds.

Over 47,000 sexual offences against children were recorded in the UK last year.


For every child identified as needing protection from abuse, another eight are estimated to be suffering abuse.

Over 90% of sexually abused children were abused by someone they knew.

NSPCC
bit.ly/2h9XvME

28.3% of women and 14.7% of men had experienced some form of domestic abuse (physical, sexual or psychological) since the age of 16, equivalent to an estimated 4.6 million female victims and 2.4 million male victims.

2013/14 Crime Survey for England and Wales
bit.ly/2h9YUTA

A close-up, profile photograph of a man with a shaved head, looking down with a somber expression. His hands are clasped together and pressed against a light-colored, textured wall. The lighting is soft and natural, highlighting the contours of his face and the texture of the wall. A large, semi-transparent teal circle is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

‘it took me many years to “allow” God into the deepest, darkest, messiest parts of my heart and help me be “rid of my disgrace”... and to allow myself both to forgive and to accept God’s forgiveness myself.’

EFFECTS OF SERIOUS SEXUAL ASSAULT

'I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure' (Psalm 40:1-2, ESV).

'In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me' (Psalm 120:1, ESV).

Please also be aware that, whilst the church is a place where we can experience grace and forgiveness, it can also be the place we feel most exposed and shameful. Be gentle with those people in your congregation who feel crushed. Encourage them that God's Word assures us that there is good to come out of suffering '... knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame...' (Romans 5:1-5, ESV).

Grace

God's call to all the sinful and the ashamed:

Nearly half of victims (45%) reported suffering physical injuries from the most recent serious sexual assault incident they had experienced since age 16.

Three in five (61%) victims of serious sexual assault suffered mental or emotional problems, while two in five (41%) reported having problems trusting people or having difficulty in other relationships.

The physical injuries victims were most likely to suffer were minor bruising or a black eye (30%).

In 9% of incidents, the victim attempted suicide as a result. The victim reported becoming pregnant as a result of the incident in 5% of incidents and the victim reported contracting a disease in 3% of incidents.

2013/14 Crime Survey for
England and Wales
bit.ly/2h9YUTA

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

The LORD calls us not to fear, he knows you by name and he has paid the price to redeem you, and calls you 'precious', 'honoured' and 'loved' (Isaiah 43:1-4).

What mystery! What rapture!

'And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:16-17). There is nothing we can do to earn this amazing grace, only to have faith in the Lord of life (Ephesians 2:8-9).

I hope that as you are reading this you are someone who already knows God's grace evident in your life – if not then please read his Word, talk to a Christian you know, go to your local church and find out more about him and what he freely gives.

Yet, for some of those oppressed by their past, they can hear these beautiful words and sometimes they don't seem so beautiful because of the weight of their shame. God's grace is not just sparing us from the punishment we deserve for our sins, but also giving us what we don't deserve – forgiveness

acceptance a place in his kingdom, and honour.

Yes, honour even for the shamed.

I wonder how many of you have at times, like myself, looked at all the Levitical laws in the Bible and considered them irrelevant and outdated – sound familiar? Yet for those crushed by shame they are beautiful. Yes, there are a number of things that may cause you to be 'out of the camp' for a while – bleeding, blindness, being abused, the list goes on – yet for each of these God provides a prescription for a way back into the camp and to be able to attend the temple again, the symbolic place of God's presence with his people in Old Testament times.

This prescription is sometimes an offering, but usually a sacrifice of some sort, whereby God takes the sin or shame of his child, puts it on the animal, and that animal pays the price to allow them back into the community and presence of God.

And then, through Jesus, all the laws are not forgotten but fulfilled!

Jesus' sacrifice is the once and for all sacrifice to reunite God's children with himself and his family. Jesus brings 'good news to the poor', 'binds up the broken-hearted' and 'proclaims

PREVALENCE OF INTIMATE VIOLENCE

liberty to the captives', including those emotionally and spiritually bound by shame (Isaiah 61:1-3).

Isaiah goes on to say that:

'Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion; instead of dishonour they shall rejoice in their lot; therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion; they shall have everlasting joy' (Isaiah 61:7 ESV).

Do you feel too ashamed even to enter God's family and kingdom? Don't worry! In the kingdom of the blessed all eyes are on Jesus, not on you! Allow yourself to accept forgiveness and accept honour for Jesus' sake and for his glory rather than your own. Yet in doing so you too will be blessed. What an amazing truth!

Forgiveness

So can this amazing forgiveness really be free?

Yes, free, but not cheap, ³ Christ paid the ultimate price so that we can be honoured rather than ashamed, and we are called to surrender our lives to him. There is no honour in being served by paid help. But it is different when Jesus, God incarnate, volunteers to serve

Approximately 85,000 women and 12,000 men are raped in England and Wales alone every year; that's roughly eleven rapes (of adults alone) every hour.

Nearly half a million adults are sexually assaulted in England and Wales each year.

One in five women aged 16-59 has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 16.

Only around 15% of those who experience sexual violence choose to report to the police.

Approximately 90% of those who are raped know the perpetrator prior to the offence.

Rape crisis statistics
bit.ly/2gYEBVu

you. The Lord of the universe bestows favour and honour upon all sinners who merely trust in him. So get accustomed to being honoured rather than ashamed!

‘He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins’ (Colossians 1:13-14, ESV).

‘And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him...’ (Colossians 1:21-22, ESV).

Honour

The Bible talks a lot about the righteous being honoured. And through Christ’s blood we are made righteous, and therefore honoured in God’s eyes.

Amazing! Unthinkable! Yet true.

Yet, as we follow Christ, we will experience honour before God, but dishonour before people. After all, our Lord was ‘despised’, ‘wounded’, ‘rejected’, ‘stricken’ and ‘crushed’ (Isaiah 53:3-6). As we experience the wronged in this world (within and without) we are

presented with opportunities to feel just a little bit of the shame that Christ experienced. And as we have experiences similar to his, we’ll feel more connected with him in a humbling way.

Opportunities that shame us in the world’s eyes can serve to renew not just our humility but also our prayerfulness as we turn to Him in difficulties, and renew our hope as we look forward to the honour and glory of the new heaven and new earth (see Revelation 21:4).

Commissioning

So as Christ commissions us to spread His word and show his love to a broken world, we are invited to join in some of the shame he endured. This may be in your community, your family or your workplace. Yes, it can be incredibly difficult to be the voice of Christ in an increasingly secular and sceptical NHS. Yet the more the world shames us for Christ’s sake, the more honour we receive before God (whether we want it or not!).

But we are called first and foremost to love God and then to love our neighbour, so may our love for others overflow and let us prayerfully and humbly welcome any shame that doing so may bring.

Let us boast about the Lord, boast about our

weaknesses, and show faith through obedience, and praise him whether we are crying 'Thank you Lord!' in better seasons, or 'Help me Lord!' in the difficult seasons of shame.

Roles and reporting as healthcare professionals

On a work-related note, I would urge you to fervently pray for any patients you have who are feeling crushed by their shame, especially where there are dilemmas about reporting suspected abuse or victimisation.

As nurses, or other healthcare staff, we are duty-bound by law to report certain things. Yet in doing so we risk losing the trust of our patients, who may have spent months or even years working up the courage to disclose this to us.

Firstly we need to be honest about not just the fact that we may have to report our suspicions, but to gently explain our rationale for this, emphasising that you are doing so to support your patient. This may be particularly difficult if your patient threatens to harm or even kill themselves if you dare say anything. Please try not to feel manipulated by this. People who have been abused are often desperate and despairing. Listen to them. Devote your time to such people – they are

precious children of God; a God who welcomes the poor in spirit and the oppressed.

Know what resources are in your local area – rape crisis, crisis pregnancy centres, women's refuges, hostels, counselling, psychiatric services etc, especially if there are appropriate Christian resources your patient may benefit from.

Refer to mental health teams if you have concerns. But follow through with your patient if they allow you to.

But first and foremost pray, pray, PRAY! Lift up their broken spirit to the Lord who rescues, heals and honours. And, if necessary, seek pastoral support for the impact such cases may have upon yourself.

If you 'burnout' you can't serve your patients to the best of your ability. But draw from the fountain of life, from the Lord who gives you strength and mercy enough for each day. 🙏

1. Welch ET. *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection*. Greenboro: New Growth Press, 2012:2
2. Ibid:10
3. Jensen M. *Is forgiveness really free?* London: TGBC, 2014:33