

How to Help Kids with Shame



by EDWARD T. WELCH

It was finally the day of the Halloween parade at school, and one little third-grade girl was beyond excited. She left for school wearing her Elsa costume, wig, and makeup. What could be better than to be dressed as Elsa *all day*? She was dropped off to school a bit late, so she didn't notice that those she passed were all in their everyday clothes. When she burst into the classroom, her costume was perfect. But the class *brought* their costumes rather than wore them. Mercifully, her teacher sent her to the nurse's office until her mom could come for her. She begged her mom to not go back to school that day. Shame wants to hide.

Another snapshot. A twelve-year-old boy would not respond to his name. Neighbors assumed that he was belligerent and aloof until they met a family member who mentioned that the name he responded to was "Good-for-nothing." With such a name, expect other abuses in this boy's life, such as neglect, anger, and violence. He endured all of these—and so he experienced shame. He felt worthless because others have treated him as if he is.

These are only two ways that shame can be apparent in children or teens. This article will describe shame and bring selected biblical passages to

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that experience. My goal is to know our children better and find a way into Scripture that can make it lively and meaningful to them. Using the story of a boy named Steven, I will approach shame first from the perspective of a counselor or helper, and then I will offer suggestions for parents.

What Is Shame?

Shame is the experience of being unacceptable, less than others, and different. When children are with familiar people they feel it less, but when they are in public and feel seen, it can rage. Shame is being *seen* and unacceptable.

Shame can include guilt, which is the imprint that we have done wrong before God and other people, but, at least with children and teens, shame is less often traced back to a particular wrong. If it is, confession of sin can quickly put it to rest. Shame is usually more complicated. It is more often

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a result of being treated badly or simply believing that we lack something and don't fit in.

Shame is easy to miss. You can know a person a long time and not know shame is right under the surface. It prefers to hide. The reality is that shame is a dominant feature of our human experience no matter what age we are, and it is a dominant theme in Scripture. Step one is to see it.

Words for shame. Shame has a diverse vocabulary, and knowing some of the many words that describe it can help us to see it more clearly. Here are a few.

Inferior	Weak
Inadequate	Rejected
Loser	Nothing
Different	Ignored
Failure	Bullied

Misfit	Unattractive
Stupid	Unpopular
Embarrassed	Unwanted
Stared at	Last

These experiences are usually incited or aggravated by mistreatment, but they can also come attached to our humanity and appear even under the best of conditions. They remind us that we fall short, don't quite fit in, and are not yet at home.

Unprovoked shame. Some children feel secure in their world. They are not preoccupied with the possible opinions of others. They seem to enjoy being around people, and they enter quickly into new relationships. Here you find the born entertainers. But many children are especially self-conscious, and this experience does not have to be linked to the harmful actions or words of others. They feel *insecure* and at sea when separated from a safe person or a safe place. Parents might describe them as *shy*, *anxious*, *introverted*, or *easily embarrassed*. Life might feel like a series of standards imposed by school, church, the community, parents, siblings, or friends, and all these are opportunities for failure. As counselors and parents, we recognize that these struggles don't simply disappear over time, though they might be pushed into the background as a child matures.

Provoked shame. Shame also has its reasons. It is a response to the sinful words or actions of other people. These experiences of shame can have more enduring consequences. Growing and maturing does not push them very far into the background.

This shame can be provoked by *neglect* and *rejection*—what others *do not* do more than what they do. Another person is favored. Other matters are more important than you. Perhaps neglect and rejection were a one-time event. More often they were an enduring experience in everyday life.

Victimization is more intentional than rejection and neglect. This shame is a response to the oppressive sins of other people. Children and teens have been treated as objects—like nothing—and they believe they are nothing. This victimization can include childhood traumas such as sexual violations, physical violence, and persistently cruel words.

Shame in Scripture. These basic words and categories prepare us to see shame in Scripture. Since shame is more prominent in human experience than we might think, we expect that it is prominent in Scripture. And it is. Scripture prepares us to see shame at the very outset. “The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:25). They were naked but not “seen” in the sense that they were considered unacceptable. Soon

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they would be naked but ashamed. Scripture then becomes the story of our shame and how the Lord empties shame of its power, takes shame on himself, and then banishes it forever.

Look for words such as *dishonor*, *poor*, *weak*, and *oppressed*. Key people include barren women, lepers, tax collectors, and Samaritans. All were rejected by their communities but become heroes of faith. The entire story of shame turns, of course, when we see Jesus. He is the one who takes on our shame and gives us his reputation. “Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed” (Ps 34:5).

As those who want to help children, shame, from any cause, elicits our compassion. The Lord never minimizes our shame. He also speaks words that can build us up when we feel beyond repair and unacceptable. The following case study describes the experience of a boy who feels his academic differences and failure, and these failures are accentuated by the inevitable demeaning comments of others. As part of caring for him well, the goal is to know and offer these healing words from the Lord.

Shame and the Story of Steven

Consider Steven, a smallish, eleven-year-old boy who knows that every day at school will remind him that he doesn't measure up. Reading and math are hard for him; paying attention is even harder. He fits the descriptions

of Attention Deficit Disorder. He already believes he is stupid but the inevitable comments from other kids make everything harder.

We all experience failure. We are able to do some things well and some things less well. But Steven is so experienced in failure that the unsuccessful events of life began to merge together into an identity. Failure was not something he did. It is who he is. Perhaps this was not voiced to him by a frustrated adult *every* day, but he hears it often enough to give consistent evidence that he is, indeed, a failure.

He is the oldest of three children. His sister is almost ten and doing fine both in school and with friends. His brother is seven, and Steven finds him to be a nuisance. His parents are concerned but have different ideas of how to help. His mother is gentle and non-confrontational. She would like to make life easier for him. His father is old-school: best to face your problems, plow through them, stick with them until you have mastered them. He tends to be impatient, even though he had similar struggles in school. He doesn't understand his son and lives somewhere between frustration and resignation.

Home schooling would seem to resolve his problems. There would be fewer people to compare himself with. He could work at his own pace. But when shame is who you are, a string of days without criticism is not enough to change an identity. It only makes it quieter, becoming more strident in public settings. And home schooling is not an option because both parents work. So off he goes to school.

His emotions usually run in one of two directions: anger at himself or anger at others.

"I am so dumb." Whether he says it under his breath—unconsciously—or says it with anger, it is his commentary on his life.

"You are so dumb." When emotions got the best of him, which they often do, he takes the damaging words he has heard about himself and hurls them at others. These words are one feature of his angry and less inhibited behavior. Self-control seems to be getting worse as he gets older.

Where do you start? Steven's parents send him to a counselor for two reasons: they want him fixed and they want help for themselves. Picture

yourself as the counselor. You partner with the family, especially as you come alongside the parents and help *them* be Steven's counselors.

The first challenge is: Where to begin? You have a long list from which to choose. If you look for something good in him, you'd find his creative streak. He has an interest in how the house is arranged and decorated. His comments are interesting and sometimes carried out.

He is angry, and anger is always important. It's also an easy way to get into Scripture. But you want to proceed carefully. Counselors want to say what is right—yet that is rarely our greatest challenge. It is more difficult to discern what is most important.

You notice that Steven is inattentive and seems to have academic weaknesses. Rather than focusing on that in counseling, you suggest that the parents look into educational testing through their school as a way to gather more information about their son.

Failure travels through all of Steven's story. Since failure and shame are identified as critical matters of humanity, you decide to enter Steven's world here. The gist of the biblical story is that the Lord has a huge soft spot for those who are not accepted by others, who are different, and who don't quite measure up.

“Pour out your heart” (Ps 62:8). With children and teens, having a clear agenda is no guarantee that you will get to where you want to go. Children might have no interest in speaking to you. Even if they are willing, they might not be able identify what is troubling them. Children need skill to put their emotions into words. In God's household, we try to put our troubles into words and speak those words to the Lord. This means that you hope to draw out the child. The more he speaks, the better.

“Steven, God likes you to talk to him (Ps 62:8). He likes you to tell him what was great about your day, what was hard about your day, and where you want help. I am going to talk to him about those things. Do you want to pray with me?”

The psalms are examples of how we can speak to our Father. They also teach us how to talk with each other. The psalms often move naturally from talking to the Lord, talking *about* the Lord with each other, praising the

Lord together, and crying out to the Lord together. We invite a child to speak with us because that's what we do with God *and* with each other.

If the child is reluctant, you can still know the child by way of parents, teachers, Sunday School teachers, and others. And because parents are always the primary helpers, an unproductive time with a child is not the end

Counseling moves back and forth between knowing the child and knowing God's words to the child.

of fruitful involvement. Still, you hope to engage him personally as much as possible. To this end, you work to put words on his experience.

"Steven, you don't seem to like school at all. Can you imagine anything that is as bad as school?"

"No, school is the worst.

You try a few words. "Sometimes, when your teacher talks, you start thinking about other things—maybe things that you enjoy more than school. That makes school even harder because you might not hear your teacher's directions. Then people always tell you to listen and try harder. You can feel different from everyone else, and no one likes to feel different."

"I just don't like school."

If a parent is present, ask the parent to help Steven find words that describe his experience. These words direct you to pictures that can summarize his experience, and then you can move into the right and true story. Counseling moves back and forth between knowing the child and knowing God's words to the child.

Three Bible stories. Here are three biblical stories that can be an entry into Scripture for children and for us all.

Story #1: Meet the tax collector. Tax collectors were among the outcast. No one liked them; no one wanted to be associated with them. But Jesus is different than the rest of us. Jesus liked the outcasts, because they needed his help, and it turns out that he was an outcast too. He invited tax collectors

to eat with him, which was another way of saying, “Please join me; you are fully accepted here” (Matt 9:11).

One of the better known stories of the New Testament is about a tax collector who wants to see Jesus but thinks he is too bad to get too close (Luke 19:1–8). To his surprise, Jesus, even with a large crowd all around him, sees Zacchaeus up in a tree, calls him by name, and then spends the afternoon at his house. Zacchaeus becomes a friend of Jesus. From outcast to someone who Jesus knows by name. From rejected to being honored because he is a friend of God. No wonder he changed so dramatically. We take on the character of the one who honors us.

This story might draw a child in to Scripture. If not, you keep looking for ways to know the child, put words on his experience, pray together, and surprise him with how Jesus accepts him with understanding and kindness.

Story #2: Put on new clothes. Here is another teaching about shame: Jesus gives us new clothes. Most children have some sense that the right clothes—the cool clothes—can bring some dignity to life, and the wrong clothes can embarrass. Throughout biblical history, clothes were connected to status. This story of God giving us clothing appears almost immediately in Scripture when humanity was identified as naked and unashamed, only to soon be naked and in desperate need of a covering.

Humanity was seen and found unacceptable. Now one question goes through all Scripture: Where can we find adequate covering for our shame? The story ends with wedding garments that cover all of God’s people (Rev 19:7–8). In the meantime, think of Joseph’s coat, the priests’ garments (Ex 28:2), and the clothes God gives us for spiritual warfare (Eph 6:10–15).

The beginning of the conversation might go like this. “Most of us have clothes we really like to wear, and we have other clothes we wish we never had to wear. Do you see these flip-flops I’m wearing? For some reason, I really like them. I think they are cool. Do you have any favorite thing to wear?”

“I like clothes that have the same color. And my black sneakers are my favorite.”

One way to bring up clothing in Scripture is through Zechariah’s vision of a priest named Joshua who found himself in the heavenly courts in ratty,

dirty clothes (Zech 3:1–5). Satan was quick to accuse and have the priest expelled. His argument was that the priest was unfit to be in God’s presence and should be made an outcast. The Lord, however, rebuked Satan and then dressed the priest, who represented us all before the Lord, in pure vestments and a clean turban. The style of dress might not be a modern one, but the outfit was beautiful. The turban added the royal touch of a crown.

The point of the story is that Jesus takes away our guilt and shame, and he makes us presentable. Since Scripture has different images of those clothes, counselors can take some liberty in imagining them.

Another story of God’s covering comes from a brief but critical comment about how Gideon, filled with fear and inadequacy, grows in strength. “The Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon” (Judg 6:34). This is how close the Lord comes to his people in order to make the weak strong. He covers us with himself.

You could say something like this. “When Jesus brings you into his house, he gives you new clothes that are the best. He actually makes you look strong. Like a soldier. With spears and swords and armor and shields.” Then read Ephesians 6:10–15 or Judges 6 with Steven.

Story #3: Do some boasting. When we sink under the weight of rejection, we often try to attach ourselves to someone of reputation. For adults it can be a sports team, for teens it can be a celebrity or a favorite band, for younger children it might be a friend who is popular. In other words, we recognize that our achievements will never be enough to pick us up and make us an accepted member of a group. We need the reputation of another. And that is the essence of the gospel of Jesus.

Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.” (Jer 9:23)

People are natural name-droppers. We try to ride famous coattails to enhance our reputation. “I was talking to the governor yesterday. . . .” With

Jesus, we are actually authorized to name-drop because he has come so close to us. In him we have the greatest friend imaginable. He has called us his own. He has brought us into his inner circle and shared his intimate thoughts and plans. His words to us, “I know you, and you are mine,” is *the* best comfort after rejection and failure.

For Steven’s parents. Steven’s parents have sought a counselor to help *Steven* more than help them. But a counselor should redirect them on a hopeful course as well.

“Thank you for inviting me into what is happening in your family. Since you are Steven’s primary counselors, the way I can be most useful is to come alongside the two of you and set a course that we are confident is a good one. You have the perfect foundation: you love your son, you want to grow in Christ as you parent him, and we believe that the Lord hears us in our time of need. The question before us is: How can you love him even more wisely and in a way that the two of you are united?”

We can then discuss what love looks like.

Love begins with patience and kindness. The impatience of anger is never helpful, and, for a boy who is already laid low by his failures and the comments of others, anger will tear Steven down even more. So start here.

Love looks for and enjoys the strengths of others. There are benefits to persevering in matters that are challenging, but parents must accent the strengths of their children more than the weaknesses. Steven is creative and has a keen sense of visual space and beauty. Ask them to come up with ways to affirm this in him. And note that once they begin to look for his strengths, they are likely to find many more.

Love wants a growing knowledge of the other person. Both parents will want to know Steven in a way that they can speak words that describe his experience. Educational testing can assist them, as can pediatric physicians. Teachers, Sunday School teachers, and family members can contribute to an even fuller profile. Whatever strategies come from this knowledge will include small goals and small steps for growth. For example, if Steven is weak with numbers, urge his parents to revise their expectations, work with him more patiently, and work at shorter bursts that might gradually be extended.

Through all this, Steven's parents will want to support their growing, wise love with humility. They will do best when they see themselves as needy before Christ. Then they will pray for their son, pray for themselves, ask others to pray, and be quick to seek the advice of others. They will also do best when they see Steven's struggles as more similar to their own rather than less. No doubt both of them can identify feelings of inadequacy, failure, and not being included.

Reputation, failure, rejection, and shame—these belong to us all. Imagine Steven's father setting out to see his own quest for achievement and how the gospel of Jesus Christ presents a competing reality in which we

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trust in Jesus and his achievements. Imagine parents being able to confess how they would like to boast about something in themselves, and how they want to grow to boast more of Jesus.

Shame and Jesus

Jesus is our redeemer—a powerful and overcoming savior. But for kids who are struggling with failure, rejection, and shame, it may be more helpful to spend time looking at Jesus' ministry to outcasts and his suffering and shame. He was rejected by Jews and Gentiles. He was even rejected by his friends. The events leading up to his crucifixion accumulated one degrading experience after another. Jesus was insulted, spat upon, whipped, and treated as though he were nothing. On the cross, he was naked as he cried out "My God, why have you forsaken me" (Matt 27:26). In all this, he both shared in, and carried, our guilt and shame. Introducing children to *this* Jesus is what will help

Gradually, the message comes through. His people are the ones familiar with failure, rejection, and shame. Those who rest in their own achievements rest in a lie. The evidence that we are his people is that we have learned that

achievements are an unstable foundation for life. When we know this, it's clear why we need Jesus.

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:26–27).

Who would have thought that a child's failure and rejection would take both the child and his parents into the heart of God and the good news of his death and resurrection?

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