



*A Path from Shame to Belonging*

*Several months ago a Muslim friend of mine came over to visit. As soon as she walked in the door I could tell that something was troubling her, but I made tea and we sat together and chatted for a while about our kids. As I asked her about her extended family she slowly started to share with me what was worrying her. A few days previously she had found out that a niece from her husband's side of the family had given birth completely out of the blue. No-one, not even her own mother, had known that she was pregnant. The girl was seventeen, and not yet married. My friend told me that the girl's father was extremely angry while her mother was very upset and crying all the time. The grandmother refused to come out of the house because she was so ashamed. The neighbours were already starting to gossip as they had heard the cries of a newborn baby and seen the baby clothes drying on the rack outside the house. Shame had been brought on the whole family. Even my friend, who lived in a different area of town, felt the shame, and was afraid that her neighbours would hear about what had happened. She was worried that her kids would be teased at school, and that people would stop buying snacks from her husband's little tea stall. They too would be shamed by their own community.*

This story is maybe a familiar one to many of us. However it still made me feel profoundly uncomfortable, and if I'm honest, angry. No-one appeared to be considering the needs of the girl and the baby. Everyone was too busy considering their own shame and working out how to protect themselves. My friend, while sad, was resigned to think that things would only get worse, but couldn't see any way to help. Indeed, a

couple of months later I heard that the father had rejected his daughter and she had had to move out of the house along with her baby, to a new community who didn't know her past.

It is through stories such as these that I have learnt a little of what shame means from a specifically Southeast Asian, and maybe more generally, an Asian perspective. I say 'a little' because I know that as a Westerner I will never fully understand something that is so intrinsic to who my friends are, to how society views them, and to how their culture operates.

But it is also through stories such as these that I have learnt to keep listening to people's stories, because the gospel is big enough to speak into every situation, into every language and culture, and to redeem and restore. Our job is to be ready to present the gospel in such a way that it meets people where they are and speaks to their hearts' longings. So how could I as a follower of Isa Al-Masih speak into this situation? How could I speak about a gospel that sets us free from the burden of shame?

What is the heartfelt need in this story? What needs to be restored? The emphasis is not on the moral failure of the girl, or the guilt that she might feel for having done something wrong, but rather the emphasis is on the shame brought on her, her family and her baby, by her actions. When I asked my friend how I could pray for her and her family, she didn't ask for prayers that God would forgive her niece, but rather wanted me to pray that they could quickly find the father of the baby and get him and the niece married so that people would forget what had happened, and the shame would be forgotten by the community and the family's honour would be restored.

In the minds of most Southeast Asian Muslims sin is not something that affects God, and therefore only needs to be dealt with if it will damage relationships or cause shame. So I've found that in conversations with my friends talking about sin usually gets me nowhere. But if I start to talk about shame, it is something that they can all identify with and it has given me opportunities to share stories from the Bible.

*I sit cross-legged on the porch of a friend's house, sipping cool water and watching the daily activity of life in an urban village. We greet everyone who passes by, most on their way to the well to wash, others selling snacks, some chasing after their kids. I ask them questions about who people are, where do they belong in this community? After a while I gently try to move the topic forward and ask about who is most respected in the community and why? The answers come quickly and everyone is in agreement: the leader of the mosque, those who have been on the Haj, the appointed community leader, those who do good for the community especially helping others who are in need. What about the opposite of this I ask? What about those who are not respected, or maybe even are shamed by the community? I am met with silence! Backtracking a little I explain that I don't want to hear specific details, but what kind of things warrant shame? They talk in hushed tones now, mentioning adultery, pregnancy outside of marriage, rape. They speak of parents shamed by their children who are troublemakers, those who have monetary loans they cannot repay, those who deceive others. Is there any way of getting rid of this shame I ask? Sometimes they say there is a practical solution (such as adoption in the case of infertility, or a quick marriage if a girl is pregnant), sometimes people leave and find a new community, but mostly*

*'it just takes time, eventually things are forgotten.' I take a deep breath and ask if they know the story of Hagar from the Scriptures. Most of them recognise her name and are happy to listen as I share Hagar's story with them. A story of a woman who carried deep shame, who was shunned by her community, but who was met by a God who saw her, who knew her shame, but who showed great compassion and provided for Hagar. As I speak about a God who "not only sees the shamed, but also pursues them."<sup>26</sup> I pray that my friends will remember this story. That when they experience feelings of shame in their own lives, or when they receive shame from others, they will remember a God who sees them, who cares and who will provide for them.*

Shame clearly has many faces and devastating consequences. In Southeast Asia alone these will vary between ethnic groups. I have heard stories from an ethnic group on one island where people experience shame because they haven't spent enough money on their parents' funeral. One woman from this ethnic group shared with me how she wasn't able to visit her parents-in-law after she got married as she and her husband were too poor to travel. The parents-in-law still pile shame on her every time they speak with her on the phone, over 20 years later.

Despite its many faces shame can be defined as "the deep sense that you are unacceptable because of something you did, something that has been done to you, or something associated with you. It is characterised by feelings of exposure or

---

<sup>26</sup> Audrey Frank, *Covered Glory: The Face of Honor and Shame in the Muslim World* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2019), 42.

humiliation.”<sup>27</sup> Perhaps more simply, shame can be described as a ‘loss of face.’ Shame always entails a relational and public aspect. So it is a loss of face before someone, or in someone’s eyes, which may include a loss of face in our own eyes. We experience shame when we fall short, or don’t measure up to the standard that is considered to be honourable, whether that is our own standard, God’s standard, or standards imposed by our friends, by society etc.

The world has many remedies for shame and their focus is usually on remedying our experience before others.<sup>28</sup> In the Western world this can involve self-help books which boost our self-esteem and help us to flood our minds with positive thoughts. Or it could involve doing good works so that others think more highly of us. In collectivist cultures the remedies are more extreme. As people try to regain their honour, those who have caused them shame need to be removed, whether it is through honour killings or ostracism. In Southeast Asia the shame is often covered up, in the hope that even though people know what has happened they won’t talk about it and in time it will be forgotten.

But our primary experience of shame is actually our broken relationship with God. This is what needs to be restored first. Unless our friends can understand that the honour God bestows on them is unconditional, that it is not flawed like the human honour they seek to gain,<sup>29</sup> they will continue to live under the fear of the threat of

---

<sup>27</sup> Edward, T. Welch, *Shame Interrupted: How God lifts the pain of worthlessness and rejection* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Abbey Wedgeworth, “Shame.” July 16, 2018. In *Journeywomen*, produced by Hunter Beless. Podcast. MP3 Audio. <https://www.podcasts.com/journeywomen/episode/shame-with-abbey-wedgeworth-ep-60>.

<sup>29</sup> For a good discussion of this point see Simon Cozens and Christopher Ochs, “Putting the shameful body to death: some critiques and a way forward in the soteriology of shame.” *Transformation* 36, no. 4 (2019): 238.

shame. As one friend explained to me, she is constantly wondering what others think of her, to the point that it dictates her behaviour. She is a slave to the opinions of others.

So how can we help our friends find freedom from shame and from the fear of shame?

*During my first few years in Southeast Asia I met and was befriended by a lady who was a believer from a Christian background. She was kind to me and after a while I started visiting her in her home and she was happy for us to read passages from the Bible together. As her trust in me grew she opened up about her life, and the deep and hurtful pain she carried from years of abuse, that she had been unable to share with anyone else for fear of being judged. She wept a lot, she apologised a lot and her whole body demeanour displayed a lady who believed she was worth nothing. My local language was completely inadequate for this situation, and so I hugged her a lot, I read Bible passages to her in the local language over and over again about God's love for her, and I prayed with her (usually in English which she didn't understand but it was all I could manage). Then our lives went in different directions and I didn't see her again for many years. Until one evening we met again at a wedding reception, and she was transformed. Her face beamed, she was confident as she chatted with others, and she didn't stop saying thank you to me. I apologised that my language had been so bad, that I had been out of touch for so long and she stopped me. She looked me in the eyes and said 'You loved me and you pointed me to the one who loves and values me'. Her relationship with Jesus was the cure for her shame. Her new confidence came from Him.*

Sharing stories about Jesus is powerful. Jesus, during his life on earth didn't shy away from those who were in a place of shame, he didn't scorn those who carried the burden of shame. Rather he met them where they were at. He loved them, he valued them, and their association with Him restored them to a place of honour. My favourite story to share in my context is the story of the sinful woman in Luke 7. I ask my listeners to imagine a woman from the red-light district of our city coming to the official building at the centre of town to try to meet the President. Everyone knows who she is. She is gossiped about, dirty, avoided by others. Of course if she is caught trying to get near the President she will be thrown in jail. What a risk this lady took to meet Jesus. Why? Because she knew He was her only hope, and because of that she loved Him. And this woman who has only known humiliation, who has only known scorn, who has only known rejection, this woman is accepted and praised by Jesus. He exchanges her shame with honour and she is valued by Him.

Our love and acceptance of others, our valuing of them can also play a part in helping others to move from a place of shame to one of knowing they are loved and valued as God's child. I am very aware that this is much easier for me to do as a foreigner, and that associating with those who are shamed will sometimes come at a great cost to my Southeast Asian friends, as they run the risk of losing their own honour in the eyes of others. This was the first question one of my MBB friends had for me after I had shared with her more about this topic: what should our own attitude be to those who are being shamed by the community? Again, God sets the example for us, whether it is illustrated in the story of Hosea and Gomer, or by the father who risks his own honour to restore his prodigal son to a place of honour, or ultimately as Jesus endures the shame of the cross in order to relieve us of our shame.

Time and time again Jesus takes people from a place of shame, a place where they are looked down on, made to feel worthless, small and not valued. And he restores them. He restores their reputation in front of those who had shamed them. He touches them and makes them clean. He tells them that they are forgiven and that they belong with Him. He gives them a new identity, as he makes them acceptable before God, and He restores people to a new community, to His community. This is hugely important as shame is firstly about our standing before God, but it is also about our standing in community. As people who are forgiven and restored from a place of shame to a place of honour, we become part of a community who are running towards God with our shame.<sup>30</sup> Together we become a community who know that we follow the one who identifies with us because he scorned the ultimate shame, the shame of the cross (Heb 12:2), and we become a community who believe the promise that ‘the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame’ (1 Peter 2:6).

---

<sup>30</sup> Wedgeworth, “Shame.”