

WHY A STUDY ON SHAME?

Throughout the development of our other Ezer resources, we began to see that shame is rampant, not only in culture, but also within our own church. We found that shame has hindered vulnerability and prevented honest conversations, both of which are so crucial to life change. *Shame fractures our identity, our purpose, and our relationships. It paralyzes us from living out our calling to be image bearers.* This study is a combination of teaching from the Shame: Finding Freedom conference that we did a few years ago and new resources we have created as we have learned more about shame and how the gospel gives us a pathway to freedom.

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

Our desire is to equip you with language to help you identify shame in your life, combat it on a daily basis, and to have thoughtful and productive dialogue in community with one another. While you can use this resource alone, we believe it is best used in the context of biblical community. We suggest gathering a small group of friends together, using it in a community group, or even in a one-on-one discipleship relationship.

We are grateful that you are willing to do this study. You may be acutely aware of the shame that you carry, or unaware. You may not even be sure what shame is or how it differs from guilt. We have much to learn together and we are praying that you will experience a new level of freedom as you engage your story with curiosity and compassion and receive what Christ is offering you.

HOW IT WORKS

Each week is divided into five sections: *Watch, Dig Deeper, Read, Reflect, and Pray*. Follow the prompts for each section to navigate the weekly homework in preparation for your group discussion.

WATCH

Watch the assigned videos. There are usually two videos. One is a woman from our church sharing the type of shame she carried and how she experienced freedom. The other is a teaching video. You can find all resources at [resources.GraceChurchSC.org/shame](https://www.gracechurchsc.org/shame) including the videos for each week as well as a leader guide and additional resources.

DIG DEEPER

Each week has additional exercises to complete or documents to review for homework. Come prepared each week to share and discuss what you have learned. You should complete these before answering the REFLECT questions.

READ

Each week includes a story from Scripture that helps us see God's posture toward us in both our sin and suffering. Along with the Scripture, we have included a retelling of the story written by a woman in our church. Some liberties have been taken in the retelling of these stories. Use the chart provided in the back of this workbook to keep track of the stories and how God intervened to replace shame with honor and forgiveness. Let these changed lives and

the compassion of Christ encourage you to engage your own shame story with curiosity and kindness and entrust it to God.

REFLECT

Reflection questions bring out the main ideas of the week's homework and give you an opportunity to respond to what you heard and learned from the homework. These questions will be part of your group discussion.

PRAY

Each lesson closes with a prayer prompt. As you go through this study, you might find it helpful to keep a journal or memorize a passage of Scripture that keeps you tethered to the love of the Father and the truth of who you are in Christ. You may also want to consider telling a friend that you are doing this study and ask her to pray for you.

SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to thank Christy Peterson, Landry Peterson, Courtney Vaughn, Kari Buddenberg, Whitney Maness, Sarah Bailey, Haley Barinowski, Chrystie Cole, and Ruthie Delk for retelling the stories of men and women in Scripture who were covered in shame and for pointing us to a Savior who responded to them with forgiveness and compassion. We are also grateful for Madei Click, who skillfully designed the cover and interior of the study. And our thanks also go to Deb McCrary @doodlenotedeb for creating the diagrams for this study.

GET IN TOUCH

If you are a member of Grace Church, we want to help you in this process of finding freedom from shame. Please don't hesitate to reach out to us: ezer@gracechurchsc.org

If you are not a member of Grace, we encourage you to reach out to your local pastor or to get involved in a local church in your community.

If your church is interested in hosting a *Shame: Finding Freedom* Conference at your church, email us: ezer@gracechurchsc.org



**Scan here to access the
Shame study page and watch
the weekly study videos.**

WEEK 1 | INTRODUCTION TO SHAME

WATCH

Introductory Video

We have all probably heard of the book *The Scarlet Letter*. It's a fictional story of a young Puritan woman who had an affair and was literally marked with the letter A. She carried her shame in the form of this letter her entire life; it was even inscribed on her tombstone.

For this video, we asked leaders at Grace Church to hold up the first letter of the word that describes the type of shame they carried. They may have held up the letter A for Addiction, Adultery, Abortion, Anxiety, Abuse, or Anger. It is easy to let the shame that we carry define us. But it is not the truest thing about us. We can find freedom from shame when we understand and receive what Christ is offering us.

DIG DEEPER

Growing in Empathy and Compassion: As we go through this study, we will learn the role that empathy and compassion play in battling shame. This document helps us apply these to a small group setting so we can learn how to listen and care for one another. Read and come prepared to discuss with your group.

Shame Self-Assessment: This diagnostic tool of self-conscious affect will help you see how shame, guilt, and blame may operate in your life. As you answer each question, pick the response that is most like how you would respond if you were in that situation. Record your observations and come prepared to discuss with your group.

Understanding Shame Infographic: This diagram helps us understand the different types of shame, the difference between guilt and shame, and how to recognize shame in our lives.

Reflection: Overcoming the Power of Shame: This piece was written as a way for the author to process the loss of a loved one who took his own life because of the shame that he carried. Shame can become a powerful voice in our lives that convinces us that we are not acceptable to God and that we don't deserve a seat at the table. This is so far from the truth! He welcomes all of us—no matter the shame that we carry. He has made a way for both the sinners and the sufferers.

READ

Hagar's Story

Scripture: Genesis 16

**REFLECT**

Complete all the videos, readings, and exercises from Week 1 before answering these questions.

If you had to pick a letter to represent the shame that you carry, what would it be?

What did you learn about yourself from the *Shame Self-Assessment*? Do you lean more towards shame, guilt, or blame?

What was helpful about the *Understanding Shame* graphic? What questions do you have?

What stood out to you as you read the reflection on *Overcoming the Power of Shame*?

From the *Growing in Empathy and Compassion* document, which non-empathetic/non-compassionate response do you tend to use the most? What did you learn?

Was Hagar's shame illegitimate or legitimate? What was the source? How did God respond to her? How was her honor restored?

What are some of the questions, hesitations, or fears you have as you begin this study?

**PRAY**

- Spend intentional time in prayer this week asking the Lord to prepare your heart for the next nine weeks. Know that the Father who loves you is both your teacher and your healer. Trust him to guide you through this study. Ask him to open your mind and heart to the life-giving freedom he is offering to you.

Lord, grant me eyes to see, ears to hear, a mind to understand, and a heart to receive and respond to what you reveal to me.

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.

—Hosea 11:3-4 (NIV)

GROWING IN EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

When we are willing to be a little more vulnerable, and others handle our hearts with care, we discover that knowing and being known are part of our design.

—Ed Welch¹

EMPATHY AND COMPASSION: WHY THEY MATTER

One of the most powerful ways that we can demonstrate love and care for another—and be relationally connected—is to be compassionate and empathetic. You can think of compassion and empathy as a way of getting in the boat with a friend who is lost at sea and helping them navigate back to safety, rather than standing on the shore telling them where to go or judging them for being in the boat in the first place. Empathy is the ability to understand and identify with the feelings of another without being judgmental. Compassion demonstrates concern for another that is paired with a motivation to help. You can think of empathy and compassion as teammates that work together to help diffuse the power of shame.

When someone exposes their true self, whether in the form of sharing a painful experience, remembering a past trauma, confessing sin or expressing strong emotion about a difficult situation—they are putting themselves at risk of being wounded by how others respond to their vulnerability. How we respond matters.

Sometimes even telling the story makes them feel as if they are right back in the middle of the event—even if it happened years ago. It's important to stay engaged with them for as long as it takes to help them know that they are seen, heard, and loved. This may take a while, or even take place over several conversations. There is a time and place for gently offering wise counsel, to throw them a truth life-line, but we do not need to be too quick to offer what they are not yet able to hear.

During these intense moments, our brains actually stop functioning in the interconnected way in which they are designed. Our ability to listen to reason or be analytical is impaired when strong emotion takes over. Research has shown that in that moment, a compassionate response grounds us. It has that capacity to settle, soothe, and reset our minds. Empathy and compassion are powerful weapons in disarming shame.

For some of us, this is easy. Our natural bent is to respond empathetically and show compassion when someone shares something with us. For others, it is more difficult. Our tendency is to withhold care and concern.

Here are some of the reasons that we are tempted to withhold empathy and compassion. Which ones do you identify with?

- We don't have all the facts
- The story doesn't make sense
- We think we need to match their emotions
- We don't agree with their assessment of the situation
- We think they are overreacting
- We wouldn't be feeling or reacting this way if we were in the same situation

- We question whether or not their emotions are valid
- We equate being empathetic or compassionate with enabling
- We believe that giving direction is more beneficial than offering empathy and concern.
- We are uncomfortable—listening to their story may stir something in us we have not yet dealt with

GROWING IN EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

These are skills and responses that we have to practice and develop. In order to help us grow, we need to identify some *non-empathetic and non-compassionate* ways in which we may respond to others.

Here are a few examples:

- Minimizing: “It could be worse” or “At least . . .”
- Over-spiritualizing/using Bible verses as spiritual Band-Aids: “God uses all things for our good”
- Quick problem solving: “I know what you can do, try . . .”
- Blaming: “You brought this on yourself, if you had only . . .”
- Making it about you: “That’s nothing! Let me tell you about when I . . .”
- Silence or changing the subject: ignoring or not acknowledging what the person shared
- Enabling: being sympathetic and/or over-identifying without eventually pointing them to truth

Put an x beside the responses that are most hurtful to you when others have used them on you.

Draw a circle around the ones that you tend to use on others.

These responses sound familiar, especially in a group setting. They minimize a person’s pain and shut them down. There is nothing worse than having a “vulnerability-hangover” after you have shared a part of yourself, then are filled with regret because of the way someone responded or failed to respond to you.

Let’s take a closer look at two of these: *enabling* and *quick problem solving*.

Enabling responses are hyper focused on identifying with the person’s pain without ever offering the wisdom and direction they may need in order to find their way out of the hole. This type of response can leave a person weak and in a helpless and hopeless state.

Quick problem solving responses are hyper focused on the solution but ignore the pain a person may be experiencing. This type of response might even increase a person’s feelings of shame, failure, and isolation.

On their own, both of these responses lack true compassion and concern. These two responses are often more about our own discomfort with suffering than they are about helping the other person. We will vacillate between enabling and problem solving depending on our own personality, our relationship to the person who is suffering, our schedules, and a variety of other factors.

We can each learn to be more empathetic and compassionate. It takes awareness of our relational tendencies as well as a willingness to learn.

Empathetic responses acknowledge what a person is feeling and make room for their experience:

- I don’t know what to say, but I am really glad you told me.

- Thank you for sharing that with us. You are very brave. I know that took a lot of courage.
- It sounds like you are in a really hard place.
- I know that hurts.
- I am really sorry you were treated this way.

Compassionate responses are similar and communicate a deep concern paired with a desire to help. Some examples might be, *how can I support you right now? What do you need?* Compassion extends beyond just asking what is needed but moving to provide the care that person may need. We want to be a stable support as someone walks through a difficult season.

Remember, in these moments you don't have to agree with their assessment of the situation, how they are feeling, or even how they are reacting. You are also not trying to make your emotions match what they are feeling, or carry the weight of what they are feeling. In fact, you might have to distance yourself from the emotional intensity in order to be able to respond compassionately. A healthy response to another's pain that is framed by empathy and compassion will communicate that you acknowledge and understand what they are experiencing, but also that you are willing to help them through it in practical and meaningful ways.

Acknowledging someone's pain is just the beginning. Empathetic and compassionate care requires our time, energy, patience, courage, wisdom and reliance on the Spirit. *We cannot be in a hurry if we are going to care for one another well!*

COMING ALONGSIDE OTHERS

Empathy and compassion invite others into a safe relationship with us—where they can be known and vulnerable. With this posture, we can help others tell their shame stories and receive the healing and honor that God is offering. It also opens the door to provide guidance and direction as we lovingly and patiently walk with them.

Responding in this way plows up the soil of a wounded heart and makes it fertile ground to begin planting seeds of truth. God often uses this relational connection to fight the lies that shame may tell and replaces them with the truth about who God is and what he is offering.

JESUS: OUR COMPASSIONATE SAVIOR

The gospels are full of encounters where Jesus crosses the boundary between the clean and the unclean. In these accounts, we get to see how he engages those who are covered in shame with both truth and grace. We often find him touching, stooping, searching, or listening for the one who has touched him or called his name. He does not push them away. In fact, he comes near. He is not ashamed to identify with weakness, sin, or brokenness. He is not ashamed to identify with us.

Scripture is filled with passages that give us a glimpse of this compassionate Savior:

ISAIAH 30:18

The LORD must wait for you to come to him so he can show you his love and compassion. For the LORD is a faithful God. Blessed are those who wait for his help.

ISAIAH 49:13

For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on them in their suffering.

PSALM 51:1

Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins.

LUKE 10:33

Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him.

As we go through this study together, we will see *this* Jesus—our compassionate Savior! Not only does he identify with us in our shame, but he takes it on himself and in return, gives us his honor. He is our way out of shame.

Our Compassionate Savior

PSALM 103

PSALM 91:14-16

MATTHEW 9:36

MARK 1:41

JOHN 1:14

HEBREWS 2:14

2 CORINTHIANS 5:21

HEBREWS 10:10-11:25

I JOHN 3:17

LUKE 7:13

LUKE 10:33

LUKE 15:20

SHAME SELF-ASSESSMENT

TEST OF SELF-CONSCIOUS AFFECT, VERSION 3 (TOSCA-3S)²

Below are situations that people are likely to encounter in day-to-day life, followed by several common reactions to those situations.

As you read each scenario, try to imagine yourself in that situation. Then indicate how likely you would be to react in each of the ways described. We ask you to rate all responses because people may feel or react more than one way to the same situation, or they may react different ways at different times.

For example:

You wake up early one Saturday morning. It is cold and rainy outside.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would telephone a friend to catch up on news.	1	2	3	4	5
B	You would take the extra time to read the paper.	1	2	3	4	5
C	You would feel disappointed that it's raining.	1	2	3	4	5
D	You would wonder why you woke up so early.	1	2	3	4	5

In the above example, I've rated all of the answers by circling a number. I circled "1" for answer (a) because I wouldn't want to wake up a friend very early on a Saturday morning—so it's not at all likely that I would do that. I circle a "5" for answer "b" because I almost always read the paper if I have time in the morning (very likely). I circled a "3" for answer (c) because for me it's about half and half. Sometimes I would be disappointed about the rain and sometimes I wouldn't—it would depend on what I had planned. And I circled a "4" for answer (d) because I would probably wonder why I had awakened so early. Please do not skip any items—rate all responses.

1. You make plans to meet a friend for lunch. At five o'clock, you realize you have stood your friend up.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would think, "I'm inconsiderate."	1	2	3	4	5
B	You'd think you should make it up to your friend as soon as possible.	1	2	3	4	5
C	You would think, "My boss distracted me just before lunch."	1	2	3	4	5

2. You break something at work and then hide it.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would think, "This is making me anxious. I need to either fix it or get someone else to."	1	2	3	4	5
B	You would think about quitting.	1	2	3	4	5
C	You would think, "A lot of things aren't made very well these days."	1	2	3	4	5

3. At work, you wait until the last minute to plan a project, and it turns out badly.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would feel incompetent.	1	2	3	4	5
B	You would think, "There are never enough hours in the day."	1	2	3	4	5
C	You would feel, "I deserve to be reprimanded for mismanaging the project."	1	2	3	4	5

4. You make a mistake at work and find out a co-worker is blamed for the error.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would think the company did not like the co-worker.	1	2	3	4	5
B	You would keep quiet and avoid the co-worker.	1	2	3	4	5
C	You would feel unhappy and eager to correct the situation.	1	2	3	4	5

5. While playing around, you throw a ball, and it hits your friend in the face.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would feel inadequate that you can't even throw a ball.	1	2	3	4	5
B	You would think maybe your friend needs more practice.	1	2	3	4	5
C	You would apologize and make sure your friend feels better.	1	2	3	4	5

6. You are driving down the road, and you hit a small animal.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would think the animal shouldn't have been on the road.	1	2	3	4	5
B	You would think, "I'm terrible."	1	2	3	4	5
C	You'd feel bad you hadn't been more alert [while] driving down the road.	1	2	3	4	5

7. You walk out of an exam thinking you did extremely well; then you find out you did poorly.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would think, "The instructor doesn't like me."	1	2	3	4	5
B	You would think, "I should have studied harder."	1	2	3	4	5
C	You would feel stupid.	1	2	3	4	5

8. While out with a group of friends, you make fun of a friend who's not there.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would feel small...like a rat.	1	2	3	4	5
B	You would think that perhaps that friend should have been there to defend himself/herself.	1	2	3	4	5
C	You would apologize and talk about that person's good points.	1	2	3	4	5

9. You make a big mistake on an important project at work. People were depending on you, and your boss criticizes you.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would think your boss should have been more clear about what was expected of you.	1	2	3	4	5
B	You would feel as though you want to hide.	1	2	3	4	5
C	You would think, "I should have recognized the problem and done a better job."	1	2	3	4	5

10. You are taking care of your friend's dog while she is on vacation and the dog runs away.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would think, I am irresponsible and incompetent.	1	2	3	4	5
B	You would think your friend must not take very good care of her dog or it wouldn't have run away.	1	2	3	4	5
C	You would vow to be more careful next time.	1	2	3	4	5

11. You attend your co-worker's housewarming party, and you spill red wine on a new cream-colored carpet, but you think no one notices.

		not likely			very likely	
A	You would stay late to help clean up the stain after the party.	1	2	3	4	5
B	You would wish you were anywhere but at the party.	1	2	3	4	5
C	You would wonder why your co-worker chose to serve red wine with the new light carpet.	1	2	3	4	5

SCORING SHEET FOR THE TOSCA-3S

The TOSCA-3S scenarios that you just responded to were created from the personal experiences of several hundred college students and non-college adults. Your responses can now be used to calculate your scores for Shame Self-Talk, Guilt Self-Talk and Blaming Others.

Transfer your circled answers from the TOSCA-3S to the lines below. For example, if you answered a “4” for item 1a, enter a 4 under the column labeled “Shame Self-Talk” on the line next to 1a. If you entered a “1” for item 1b, enter a 1 under the column labeled “Guilt Self-Talk” on the line next to 1b, and so on. Carefully transfer your responses, because the order for a, b and c will be different for each question.

When you have finished transferring your answers, add up for score for each column. For example, your “Shame Self-Talk Total” score will be the total of all of the numbers written in the first column. Compare your total scores to the scoring interpretation on page 18.

Shame Self-Talk		Guilt Self-Talk		Blaming Others	
1a	_____	1b	_____	1c	_____
2b	_____	2a	_____	2c	_____
3a	_____	3c	_____	3b	_____
4b	_____	4c	_____	4a	_____
5a	_____	5c	_____	5b	_____
6b	_____	6c	_____	6a	_____
7c	_____	7b	_____	7a	_____
8a	_____	8c	_____	8b	_____
9b	_____	9c	_____	9a	_____
10a	_____	10c	_____	10b	_____
11b	_____	11a	_____	11c	_____
=	_____	=	_____	=	_____
Shame Self-Talk Total		Guilt Self-Talk Total		Blaming Others Total	

SCORING FOR TOSCA-3S

FOR MEN

If your score on “Shame Self-Talk” is:

- 0-24 you seldom use shame self-talk.
- 25-32 you use shame self-talk an average amount.
- 33-55 you often use shame self-talk.

If your score on “Guilt Self-Talk” is:

- 0-38 you seldom use guilt self-talk.
- 39-45 you use guilt self-talk an average amount.
- 33-55 you often use guilt self-talk.

If your score on “Blaming Others” is:

- 0-21 you seldom blame others.
- 22-28 you blame others an average amount.
- 29-55 you often blame others.

FOR WOMEN

If your score on “Shame Self-Talk” is:

- 0-26 you seldom use shame self-talk.
- 27-35 you use shame self-talk an average amount.
- 36-55 you often use shame self-talk.

If your score on “Guilt Self-Talk” is:

- 0-42 you seldom use guilt self-talk.
- 43-48 you use guilt self-talk an average amount.
- 49-55 you often use guilt self-talk.

If your score on “Blaming Others” is:

- 0-20 you seldom blame others.
- 21-28 you blame others an average amount.
- 29-55 you often blame others.

Shame

ISOLATES ME from God and others

ATTACKS my identity

TEMPTS me to believe that my BROKENNESS is the TRUEST thing about me

- BUT used by GOD -

SHAME TELLS ME

I am...

- flawed
- unacceptable
- unloveable



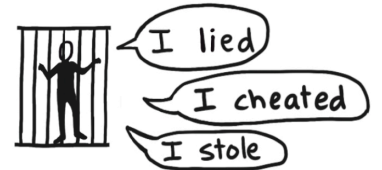
UNDERSTANDING SHAME

Shame vs Guilt

FOCUS on IDENTITY



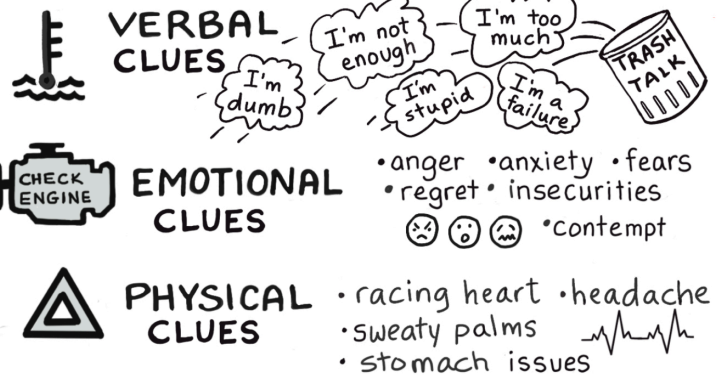
FOCUS on ACTION



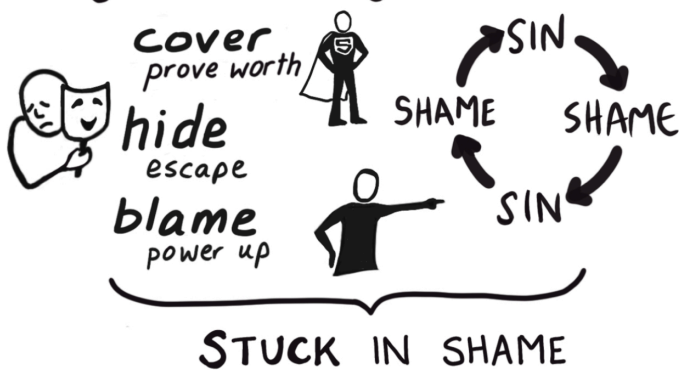
Shame spirals into DESPAIR & CONTEMPT



WARNING Shame tells us something is NOT right



Ways We Manage Shame



Shame Moves Me Toward God

When I:

- Identify sources of shame
- Repent of legitimate shame
- Lament for illegitimate shame
- Receive what Christ offers

LEADS TO FREEDOM

REFLECTION: OVERCOMING THE POWER OF SHAME

Shame begins in a whisper—*You are a fool. You are worthless. You'll never change*—and ends in a roar—*You don't deserve to be alive. Why are you still here? No one loves you.*

Shame attempts to distort the truth about who we are. It points out our sin and shortcomings and then ties them to us like shackles, robbing us of our freedom. Shame shrouds the true story of who we are. A story that screams of our worth and dignity in spite of our sin and the ways we have been sinned against. A story that tells me over and over again—there is a God who sees me in all my brokenness and wants me. A God who is not ashamed to identify with me, even when I am ashamed to identify with myself.

Shame convinces us that these life-giving words of forgiveness and freedom are not for us. Slowly shame deafens us and leads us away from the voice of truth. Away from life, away from freedom, and into the dark hall of despair, contempt, and condemnation. A hallway void of light, truth, or connection.

Sure, we find ways to cope. We cover, we blame, we hide. We reach for relief to numb the pain, the loneliness, the searing truth that we know about ourselves but are too ashamed to speak out loud. The hall gets darker. Grows narrower and soon closes in. The sign at the end of the hallway reads NO EXIT.

Another lie. More despair. Is this the way it has to end? No. A little curiosity is enough to make us turn—to look for signs of life, to listen to a different story. A story that began in a whisper at the dawn of creation—*You are good. You are a glorious delight. You are loved*—and ends in a roar—*You are not condemned. You are forgiven. You are mine. It is finished.*

These words become the weapons that do battle with our shame. The weapons that overturn the voice of the enemy and lead us out of the darkness. Words that the darkness cannot shut out. Words that the darkness cannot even comprehend.

These words are inviting us to turn. To walk into the light and be seated at the table where we can enjoy the community of the beloved—a community of sinners and sufferers. We hear a new voice that says, “You are welcomed at this table and *you are not alone.*”

The Father is here. The one who created you. The one who's been looking for you, The one who delights in and rejoices over you. The one who loves you.

The Son is here. The one who died for you. The one who was punished for you. The one who took your sin and shame and replaced it with honor and dignity.

The Spirit is here. The one who pursues you, guides you, comforts you. The one who promises never to leave you. Ever.

The Saints are here. The pilgrims and the prodigals. The sinners and the sufferers.

All are welcome at this table. Including you.

Will you listen? Will you come? Will you sit? Will you feast on what he offers—comfort, forgiveness and grace?

In this moment of our deepest shame, he gives us himself.

“Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink—even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk— it’s all free! Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength? Why pay for food that does you no good? Listen to me, and you will eat what is good. You will enjoy the finest food. “Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, and you will find life. I will make an everlasting covenant with you. I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David. See how I used him to display my power among the peoples. I made him a leader among the nations. You also will command nations you do not know, and peoples unknown to you will come running to obey, because I, the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, have made you glorious.”

—Isaiah 55:1-5

HAGAR'S STORY

GENESIS 16

Before reading this story, read the Scripture passage. Keep in mind that this is a loose retelling and liberties have been taken to capture our imaginations and help us understand the context of the story and the power of the gospel.

I was in a complicated situation. As a servant from Egypt, a foreigner, I had been brought into a family who was on an unique journey with God. I didn't know everything about what God had promised Abram and Sarai, but my everyday life was dictated by the journey that God had called Abram and his family to take. When we traveled toward the Promised Land, I went with them. When they faced conflict along the way, I stood with Sarai to welcome Abram and his men home from their battle. Regardless of my personal interactions with God, the course of my life was dictated by Abram and Sarai's choice to live a life of faith in an unseen God.

And I was equally affected by their lack of faith.

God had explicitly promised Abram a natural-born child—as well as an abundance of descendants—and sealed his promise with unmistakable signs. Yet Sarai and Abram grew impatient with their continued infertility and decided to try to achieve the results God has promised by other means. Sarai convinced Abram to take me as his wife as well so that perhaps I could be the one to carry the child of the promise.

So, I was forced into a marriage that led to me becoming pregnant with Abram's child. Knowing that Sarai had wanted to get pregnant for years, I felt shame on multiple levels. First, I carried the shame of being used—I had no choice in the matter and was simply a pawn in Abram and Sarai's plan. I was a means to an end, a vehicle to accelerate the timeline of Abram and Sarai getting something they thought they deserved. I also found myself at the root of the tension between Abram and Sarai. I was a constant and visible reminder that life had not gone the way they wanted. None of that shame was my fault. Day in and day out, I lived under the shame of being forced to play a role in a story that I had not chosen to be a part of.

But I was not entirely innocent in the story.

Though I had no choice in being used and abused by Abram and Sarai, I did choose to respond to them in anger. When I found out I was pregnant, I despised Sarai and made it so apparent that she went to Abram to handle the situation. With Abram's permission, Sarai responded with equal harshness, so I decided to take my fury and my unwanted pregnancy and run away.

And then I found myself in the desert, alone with the shame of my abuse and the shame of my behavior. Yet as much as I was unable to escape the ever-growing reminder of my circumstances in my pregnant belly, I was also unable to escape the eye of God. The angel of the Lord found me there, isolated in my shame, and called me by name. Though he guided me to return to the very setting I had been trying to escape, he comforted me with the assurance that he had heard my trouble and the promise that he would bless me with countless descendants. He redeemed the very source of my shame—my pregnancy—and guaranteed that I would see blessing from the one circumstance that drove me to the point of desperation. And in response, I called God by name as well—El Roi, the God Who Sees.

In my shame, and in yours, God looks for us. He finds us in the places we try to hide, and he assures us that he hears our groanings. In the most unlikely of ways, he is able to make much of our sufferings, to transform our circumstances of shame into blessing for us and for many generations after us. May we take deep comfort in the fact that he knows our name and that we know his—the God Who Sees.