

Praying Through Shame

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[0 : 00] And we're reading Psalm 25, the whole of Psalm 25, which is 22 verses. I'll just give you a moment to get there. Let's read God's Word.

In you, Lord my God, I put my trust. I trust in you. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.

No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame. But shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause. Show me your ways, Lord.

Teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me. For you are God, my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.

Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love. For they are of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways.

[1 : 05] According to your love, remember me. For you, Lord, are good. Good and upright is the Lord. Therefore, he instructs sinners in his ways.

He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful towards those who keep the demands of his covenant.

For the sake of your name, Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great. Who then are those who fear the Lord? He will instruct them in the ways they should go, they should choose.

They will spend their days in prosperity and their descendants will inherit the land. The Lord confides in those who fear him.

He makes his covenant known to them. My eyes are ever on the Lord, for only he will release my feet from the snare. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.

[2 : 17] Relieve the troubles of my heart and free me from my anguish. Look on my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins.

See how numerous are my enemies and how fiercely they hate me. Guard my life and rescue me. Do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.

May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope, Lord, is in you. Deliver Israel, O God, from all their troubles.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thanks, Alan. Good morning, everybody. So this morning, we're going to be thinking about guilt and shame, some cheery topics for our Sunday morning.

But I think, as you all know, it's something we all wrestle with and engage with every day of life, probably, if you think about it in any length. This week, I was traveling back from Italy, and what a six-hour journey was turned into a 25-hour journey.

[3 : 27] Now, I hate being stuck on public transport. I even hate more trying to speak to people on public transport. I'm the kind of person that would praise actively not to get into those situations. But after 25 hours, you do have to actually speak to people when you're trapped on trains and stuff together.

And I got chatting to this young Jewish lawyer from London who was trying to get back to Glasgow. And as I said, after eight hours, there's only so much small talk you can have. And he started asking me, like, why do I do what I do?

And I kind of waffled on for a bit about who I believe God to be and how freedom comes in all of life through reconciliation and a relationship with him. I'm not sure how much he listened to that, but he suddenly quickly went on to talking quite quickly about the pressures of life and how the pressures of life in and of themselves are difficult.

Yet sometimes the pressures of life expose not only the reality of life, but the expectation of who you think you should be. There's this idea that whether it was through relationships or through pressures at work or through social media, I had this expectation of not only does it feel like a pressure, but I have an expectation of who I think I should be, and I feel that gap.

I ended up chatting about, well, that gap, that feeling of that gap is a shame. It's often the expectation of who we want to be versus the reality of how we experience ourself to be. And as we got into Glasgow around 1 a.m., like, I don't want to miscommunicate this, I didn't do a big sermon to him, but I started talking about this, Sam, and I was like, I'm actually going to be thinking about some of this stuff on Sunday and how God meets us in that gap.

[4 : 54] And he doesn't just give us kind words, but he restores it and brings something new. And so, Sam 25, I hope as we push into it this morning, we'll start to address some of those things we experience all over in life, namely how guilt and shame itself work itself out in our lives.

So I'm going to quickly pray, and then we'll jump into this. Father, I thank you that you speak to us in all of life, that you're not a God to just stand idly by and watch us, but instead you intervene in our lives and in world history through your Son.

So I pray as we look at the prayer of David, as he's experiencing life, you'd help us to know what it means for us to respond to that too. That's that, in Jesus' name. Amen.

So the Psalms, as you'll know, are these beautiful collections of prayers and hymns and poems as God's people have sought and understand how they've experienced reality in light of who God is, in the good times and in the hard.

And in this Psalm, we have David, King David has written the Psalm. We don't particularly know the historical context, but it's pretty easy to guess from the start that he is under some form of pressure. He is enemies that he prays about.

[6 : 04] Yet also the Psalm seems to indicate he's got something going on in the inside. He talks a lot, as Martin's already said, about forgiveness and his own understanding of himself. And so to think about this Psalm, we're going to use a pretty basic structure that you can apply to lots of the Psalms.

Sometimes when you look at the Psalms, they have these kind of four different approaches. Firstly, the Psalmists usually cry out into reality of what is going on. They just cry out about their experience.

And sometimes it's really raw and honest, and sometimes it's very quick, as we'll see today. And then they start to lean into God. They start to lean into who he is and what he is like. And then usually the Psalm moves from that into seeing things a bit differently.

Their focus is usually shifted in some way. And that usually leads to a Psalm that ends with something new being borne out in terms of desire. So we'll start with how David cries out.

So in verse 1, David says, In you, Lord, my God, I put my trust. Now, I don't want to slam Bible translations, but a more fuller translation of that is, To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

[7 : 08] O my God, in you I trust. It's quite a full idea of this idea of David saying, I lift up my soul. It's like a Hebrew idiom for I direct all my desires towards you.

Like I long for you. Some of it is like to be greedy. I count on you. I direct all of who I am towards you, God. And then he starts to say, I trust in you.

Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame, but shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause.

I think you already start to see that the beginning of the tension is like, God, I trust in you. I know who you are. I know what you're like. Please don't let me be put to shame. I don't know if you've ever had those experiences of prayer. I've definitely had prayers like that when sometimes I've thought about my career choices.

It's not just the money and stuff. It's this idea of shame that I may be made to look silly. That actually there'll be something about exposed about who I am and how I've thought to do life. And Psalm 25 really starts to help David and us think about what he actually does with that.

[8 : 13] So as I said, he has this external threat. He says he's got enemies around him, but not just the physical threat. There's this idea he doesn't want to be put to shame at the same time. Both are a reality for David.

So I think just to quickly define some of those words, when we talk about shame, like biblically, what do we mean when we talk about shame? Well, shame is right at the beginning of the biblical narrative, that humanity in the biblical narrative right at the beginning was created to walk in harmony with themselves, with one another, and with God, in perfect union, in perfect harmony with all of creation.

Genesis 2, 25 describes it like this, and the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. Now that's not an affirmation of a, you know, the ultimate form of no shame is public nudity.

It is something to do with the idea of the posture of humanity before themselves and before others and for God is one of honor, is one of innocence, and it is the way we were designed to function.

It's the base reality that God has created all of us to walk in this way. And I don't know about you, but how many people is that the longing of their lives? To be seen, to be honest, and to be accepted, and be met, and to be known.

[9 : 25] To walk in no shame. And it's part of what it means to be made in the image of God, because there's no impurity or shame in his character. He himself is without all those things, and to walk in that reality with him is one of the dreams.

But if you know the biblical narrative, you'll know that that is not the way it pans out. Mankind's rebellion against God, the God who created him in this way, you see this kind of unraveling of that in ourselves and others and our relationship with God.

And again, in Genesis 3, it says this, Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths, and they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, Where are you?

It's kind of often the call to God for us when we experience this disconnection, be it either because of things we've done or how we believe we are in the world. It's the call of God of, Where are you? And as today, like I think most of our normative human experience is often marked by this sense of an idea of who we think we should be versus our reality of what it is actually like to live in disconnection with self, others, and God.

[10 : 46] And so guilt, me and Greg were talking about this before the service started, like guilt and shame, they kind of work together. Guilt is a moral failing. It's something I have done wrong. So it's a recognition of an action, whereas shame is more to do with the feeling you have about that action.

So guilt and shame are both things that we engage with as part of the fall, but they're slightly different things. So one, the most basic level, guilt is I have done something wrong, whereas shame is the feeling of I am wrong, of how I see myself.

Everybody's favorite, well, she's one of my favorite pop psychologists, Brenny Brown, she describes it like this, it is an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.

That unworthiness of love and belonging. And in the Christian faith, there's a tension of recognizing, actually, we are unworthy of that love and belonging, yet a God steps in and says, I make you worthy because of my name, which we'll come on to later.

But we all have that. It's called like a self-ideal. It's like your idea of who you want to be versus who you are. So if you have the idea of yourself that you're a hardworking, well-disciplined person, but your reality is you're quite lazy and unorganized, you're going to walk in some sort of low-grade form of shame.

[12 : 01] Or if you've got the kind of reality that you are maybe, I don't know, morally perfect, and you're not the kind of person that does these kind of things that other people do, yet you flirt with your coworkers or you entertain some sort of online reality or fantasy, then when you come out of that into reality, that sense of disconnection will be the shame of who you expect yourself to be versus who you are.

I think our culture has a really, I don't really know how to understand how our culture thinks about shame. On one hand, you've got something like Twitter, which I think makes me feel shame any time I'm on it because I see like 600,000 people say, if you don't think this, then you must be a really awful human being.

And some people say, am I an awful human being? If I don't like this, maybe I'm awful if I do like it. Yeah, at the same time, we're told never to have shame about anything ever, even if the things or the acts are biblically completely morally deplorable.

I think that's some of the stuff Paul is getting at in Romans 1 when he says, not only do they do them, as in the list of sins he outlines, they give approval to those who practice them. Yet at the same time, I think we have a lot of people, and I know I can experience this, where you feel shame over things that are completely morally neutral.

People feel shame over their income levels, over their body image, over where they live. Things that we're never designed to feel shame about, because it's nothing to really do with how we are, but we can feel a disconnect of who we think we should be versus how we experience it.

[13 : 30] And again, even another one is, you can feel shame for doing the right thing. Like the New Testament writers are reasoned or regularly saying, do not be ashamed of the gospel, is because maybe sometimes there's that sense of feeling shame about that.

I was at a Baha'i, I was telling Martin, I was at a Baha'i wedding yesterday, and with a lot of guys I used to play football with, and they suddenly started talking about politics. I was like, oh no, I don't want to talk about politics.

And then they started talking about the fascist right. I was like, this is definitely going to end up talking about Christianity. And it did, they started talking about Christians, how Christians are the most vile people on the planet, and how they hate the poor, and all this stuff.

And I was like, am I going to say something? And that kind of sense of like, I would potentially be shamed. And I think, all I came up with was like, no, I'm pretty sure Jesus was a fan of the poor, and he loved them. It kind of killed the conversation, it didn't really lead anywhere.

But the hesitancy was one of like an exposure. Am I going to be shamed in this for saying something different? So whatever your experience of shame is, and sorry, that's quite a long introduction, but I think to frame what shame is, what David is really experiencing of, something happening in his life, then the desire, sorry, his understanding of shame, and the idea that it's got something to do with the way he has behaved.

[14 : 43] Because shame also comes from, actually sometimes, a right sense of, actually I see how my life is, and that is not who I think I am, and who I should be. And especially when you look at how God has designed us to flourish, and to live under a union with him.

Sometimes that gap is something that should draw us closer towards him. And that's what I think you see David do next. He starts to lean in to who God is, and he starts to pray certain things in verses four to seven, where he says, show me your ways, Lord.

Teach me your paths. Guide me in truth and teach me. For you are God, my savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways. According to your love, remember me, for you, Lord, are good. So David prays. He leans into God. He's like, here, I've cried out. I know who you are, but protect me from shame.

And he asks for two things. He asks for God to guide him, which is a key part of what it means to trust God, is actually you ask God to guide you in life. So show me what to do. Like, I don't know about you. I've definitely used these.

[15 : 50] Take nothing else from this sermon. These are prayers you can pray for yourself. I've definitely prayed these verses. Show me your ways. Teach me your paths. Show me what to do in this place. And this idea of walking in the paths is something that the Psalms take through in a lot of other places.

This idea of show me what it means to be a follower of you. Teach me your ways, because these are the best ways of knowing how to deal with the situations I face in life. I guess the challenge is what it means to hear from God all the time.

And I read this quote from Dallas Willard recently on his book Hearing God. And he says, people who understand and warmly desire to hear God's voice will, by contrast, want to hear it when life is uneventful just as much as they want to hear it when they are facing trouble or big decisions.

So this is a test that we should all apply to ourselves as we go in search of God's word. Do we seek it only under uncomfortable circumstances? And yes, David is reaching out in an uncomfortable circumstance, but there's a principle of to trust God is to seek to hear what he wants to say all the time in all of life.

I think that's why he then starts to pray about forgiveness because there's obviously, like any relationship, if you're asking for guidance and connection and you have a disconnection in that relationship, then it wouldn't really work.

[17 : 06] So then he leans in again in this prayer of forgiveness. He wants to walk in right relationship with God and he appeals to God's mercy.

He appeals to who God is. He appeals to God's kindness and not to look at the actions instead of his own life. He doesn't say, oh, I've tidied my life up, God, so look at that instead. He says, actually, could you just not remember this and instead appeals to who God is and God's nature.

He uses words like mercy, steadfast love, and this idea of forgetting sins and transgressions invokes a lot of Exodus language of God's posture towards his people. And then he starts to see differently.

I think you start to see in verses 8 to 15, particularly 8, 9, and 10, and he starts to take these different concepts of God and he shifts away from praying about himself. So we're on see differently now.

Thanks. He starts to see differently and he starts to move away from thinking about himself and praying about himself to who God is. Good and upright is the Lord.

[18 : 15] Therefore, he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his ways. All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful towards those who keep his demands and covenant.

And so he's gone from crying out to leaning in to starting to shift away from his focus from what he's praying about himself to who is the God he's praying to. He starts to see who God is, about God's goodness, his consistent love, his faithfulness.

And then he comes to this verse, which, in verse 11, which the whole psalm kind of hinges on, I think. For the sake of your name, Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.

David has asked God to remember him, not based on what he's done, not based on anything else other than God's mercy and character. And he reflects on God's goodness. He reflects on who God is and asks for forgiveness based on that, nothing else, on the idea of his reputation, of his honor, of who God actually is.

David sees that his situation, his condition, how he's experiencing life is fundamentally tied to who God is and what God's name is. And that God's name is a God of righteousness.

[19 : 26] It's a God of mercy. It's a God of justice. And that's the name he appeals to. It's similar to, like, the New Testament language that we can now use as well.

He doesn't remember based on anything to do with himself, but on the actual principles of who God himself is. John Piper says about these verses, how shall such a righteous God ever set his affection on sinners like us who have scorned his perfection?

But the wonder of the gospel is that in his divine righteousness lies also the very foundation of our salvation. This is the idea that the God of the universe is so wrapped up in his own name because it is of worth and good and beauty and love that when you appeal to that, and for us, by the loving sacrifice of Jesus, he declares us innocent.

It's the forgiveness and righteousness are part of his character. And then knowing that changes well, kind of everything. In fact, the Apostle John kind of echoes some of these sentiments for us today when he says, I'm writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his namesake.

And in that context, he means Jesus. So for us, we can pray things like, for Jesus' namesake, oh God, pardon my guilt. All our sins, past, present, future, have been dealt with by the loving sacrifice of Jesus.

[20 : 52] So any guilty act, anything that makes us feel shame in our lives or creates in you a feeling of unworthiness or helplessness, God's response to that is I have cancelled that. I do not remember based on this.

I remember based on my love and my mercy. But I think David goes further than that. He goes into verse 12 to 15 and this understanding of forgiveness of who God is fundamentally changes the way we start to relate to God.

And the language of verse 12 to 15, he starts to talk about how he relates to God. Who then are those who fear the Lord? He will instruct them in the ways they should choose. And again, like, that's actually singular.

He's kind of saying who as in, who's the person? Who is focusing on a particular person, himself there. In verse 13, they will spend their days in prosperity. And there's this idea that God's invested in their well-being.

Verse 14, the Lord confides in those who fear him. And that idea of confides, it's like secret counsel. The ESV translates as God's friendship. So he understands that his forgiveness based on God's mercy leads him into a new way of relating with God.

[22 : 01] All these verses are getting the reality that forgiveness changes the way we relate to God and experience more of who he is. And if forgiveness deals with guilt, then nothing drives shame away from our hearts more than being fully known and fully delighted with.

This is a God who doesn't just forgive our sin and then stands and looks at us. He then, we become part of his counsel. He makes his way known to us. He speaks to us. He changes the direction of our lives.

And that's where I think you start to see David bring all of this into desiring anew. He starts to take all these different concepts and truths and beautiful things about forgiveness, about being known by God and he starts to then channel them into a different type of prayer of how he prays about the realness of God's presence in his life.

And he starts to pray for different things. So in verses 16 to 18, so he says in verse 15, sorry, my eyes are ever on the Lord for only he will release my feet from the snare.

So he keeps his eyes on this God and then he moves back into the reality of life. And there's a tension in that, isn't there? So he says, turn to me and be gracious to me for I am lonely and afflicted.

[23 : 18] I keep my eyes on the Lord but I am lonely and afflicted. He brings both those things together. Relieve the troubles of my heart and free me from my anguish.

Look on my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins. And again, you see that reaffirmation that all of this is possible because of the reality God takes away his sins.

But even look at some of that language. one of the interesting things about this psalm is this is a psalm of lament. So it doesn't end in some sort of declaration of mighty praise. It ends in this kind of like I'm clinging on to who I know God to be in the reality of my life.

And the reality of my life involves things like loneliness, affliction, and anguish and distress. And without God, I don't really know what else to hang on to. I recently watched, you can ask me later why I'm watching Netflix teen dramas but I recently watched the new one Heartstopper because anytime someone gets that high ratings on Netflix, I'm curious as to why so many people are watching it.

And it's a very pro-LGBTQ plus teen drama and that's kind of its narrative behind it. One of the things it does really powerfully is it does a powerful depiction of how shame isolates people and makes them feel things like anguish and loneliness and affliction.

[24 : 39] And the main character who's getting bullied all the time, he hides in his art school teacher's classroom. And at one point the teacher says to him, I thought hiding from it was all, I thought hiding from it all was safer, easier, but sometimes the loneliness was just as bad.

Don't let anyone make you disappear. Now, it's a very powerful way it does it. I think it's also very weak in how it tells you actually how to deal with shame beyond well just do what you want or feel no shame. This is literally the only options in the show.

Where sometimes that experience of when we feel like this, this loneliness, this affliction and we actually feel we can hide even more, that call of God of where are you is one of come to me because I'm a God of mercy, I'm a God of love, I'm a God of forgiveness, I'm a God of all these things towards you in the midst of the realness of your life.

So as opposed to going down on culture's route of how you deal with shame is just forget it or have the perfect life which seems to be the only two options. There is that in that reality let the Father step in in his power.

And again as verse 18 says he does this all on forgiveness. And then verse 19 to 21 he starts to pray that God would see him in the midst of all the troubles he's got around him.

[25 : 54] Again that idea of being fully seen and fully known. See how numerous are my enemies and how fiercely they hate me. Guard my life and rescue me. And again do not let me be put to shame for I take refuge in you.

May integrity and uprightness protect me because my hope Lord is in you. And he kind of comes back to this idea of this is still my reality I still have enemies I could still feel shame but my hope is in you.

And the psalm shows us of like this kind of journey David goes on to cry now but he's reality bringing it before God leaning in for guidance and forgiveness knowing that can only come because of the character of God's goodness and mercy.

It leads to a new type of relationship with God which then he then prays that in the experiences he has in day to day life. And then he ends with this wouldn't just be about him it'd actually be about all the people it'd be for the whole nation.

So as I said one of the interesting things about this psalm is it's a psalm of lament and that's often in the midst of life we have this hope that we have but in the experiences of day to day life there could be attention.

[27 : 05] Sometimes they feel really close and sometimes they feel quite distant. The thing about guilt and shame is it can make you in and of itself drive you away whereas this is a posture of a God who moves towards us especially in his son who comes and walks and lives and loves and dies and rises among his people so they may have new life.

So wherever we live in an environment where you have to pretend everything is fine that won't really lead you to new life. It can actually become a new form of shame here's where I think I should be, here's my experience and instead the gospel is one of new life not new life just to do whatever we want, new life to be reconnected with the father who has the authority to speak absolute truth as to who any of us are, to speak away any sense of unworthiness, to forgive any sense of guilt or shame that would lead us to think something of ourselves that God now says no I have something new to say to you about who you are and where I'm taking you.

So God can take your shame and he can take your guilt you don't need to be afraid of it and it needn't take you over because the Psalms do this beautiful thing I think, they never teach us to deny our emotions but they never teach us to let our emotions run away with ourselves they teach us this middle road of bringing it before God and let him shape who we are in the full reality of it and then he speaks something new into these situations and sometimes it ends with these Psalms where it's like and I'm working that out.

I cling on to the hope and the truth and the goodness of God in the midst of my reality. So I'm going to pray and then Greg will come back up. Jesus, we thank you that you are not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters and we know, I hope we know and pray we would know that nothing destroys shame like being fully known and fully delighted in and that is only made possible all because of your life, death and resurrection, all for your namesake, because of who you see us to be and the forgiveness that you bestow in each one of us because of who you are, not because of anything we can bring.

So would you help us to walk, Lord, as men and women who understand and know and experience the love that you have for us, the forgiveness that gives for us and to hold it out as a message of hope for those who are struggling with no hope.

[29 : 28] I ask that in Jesus' name. Amen.