

Counselor's Toolbox

More Than a Proof Text: “You feel ashamed—but Christ is the lifter of your head.” (Psalm 3:3)



by KRISTIN SILVA

What does shame look like? Shame's posture is downcast—eyes down, head down, hiding from the gaze of others. Often in counseling as people begin to tell the story of their shame, the struggle shifts from something they have experienced at another time and place to something they feel right now, with you in the room. I remember this moment with a friend. As the shameful pieces of her story entered our conversation, I watched her head sink lower and lower. My presence with her, my eyes upon her, and my knowledge of the intimate details of her experience all seemed to make the weight of shame even heavier.

How might Scripture speak into this moment? We had talked about shame in the past, but this time was different. In this moment, her body began to reflect the shame she had previously only spoken of. She was not merely describing feeling dirty or shameful; she was literally downcast before me, embodying the posture of one who is unworthy. So, we began by putting words to what she was feeling and how her body was reflecting it. Then I read Psalm 3:3 to her.

But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the
lifter of my head. (Psalm 3:3)

I hoped we would find some help there. Could we find ways that her

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experience is parallel to David's? Could this become her prayer too?

David wrote this psalm as the consequences of his most shameful sins were unfolding. Because he had taken another man's wife and had her husband killed, the prophet Nathan foretold of death and rebellion in David's household.¹ Now, as David writes Psalm 3, his son Absalom is contributing to the fulfillment of that prophecy by trying to kill his father and usurp the throne.² As he fled from Absalom, the weight of those sins hung in the background. He speaks his fear and shame to the Lord, opening the way for others to be blessed as we learn how to do the same.

To consider the psalm with my friend I asked her:

What do you think the memory of those sins felt like for David?

Where does the memory of your own sin take you?

Another way David suffers in this psalm is that his own people make false judgments about him. His people wonder if there is any hope for him. To them, he is so far gone that "there is no salvation for him in God" (3:2). Though actual accusations are not always present, shame often begins to stir when we perceive that others are judging us. Because David's relationship with the Lord was especially intimate, my friend and I imagined what it must have felt like for it to be called into question. I asked her:

What kinds of thoughts do you think might be going through his head?

What are the places in your own life that it feels like people judge you?

As you sit here with me, what are you afraid I might be saying about you in my mind?

And because our inner voices say the same things that outer voices might say, I asked her:

What are you saying to yourself?

The inner and outer voices often speak as a chorus in accusation against us.

Then we talked about how shame is like a foe. It might begin with

¹ 2 Samuel 12:10–11

² 2 Samuel 13–18, specifically 16:22

the fear of judgment from others, but it quickly grows and expands into a full-blown attack. Shame hurls insults: you are not good enough; you are not worthy; people are going to find out how filthy you really are. It feels like enemies coming at you, like an attacking army rising against you, pushing you down. "O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me" (Psalm 3:1). To bring these verses into my friend's life, I asked her:

What does it feel like when shame rises against you?

What would the first two verses say if you wrote them in your own words?

After this, I read verse 3 out loud and very slowly. "You, O LORD, are a *shield* about me." I paused and we talked about the nature of God's protection.

What does a shield do in the midst of an attack?

In what ways does the Lord do this for you in a moment when shame attacks you?³

From there I moved to the second half of the verse, "You, O LORD are the *lifter* of my head." I paused again and encouraged her to lift her head. We talked about everything she was feeling—the vulnerability, the fear of standing before the Lord and being seen by him.

As she lifted her head, I pulled in the third part of the verse. David says that the Lord is our *glory*. It means that he shines his face upon us.⁴ And like Moses on Mt. Sinai, when the radiance of his glory shines upon us, we shine too.⁵ This last truth was very meaningful to her. With tears running down her cheeks, she reflected on lifting her head to see the shining face of the Lord.⁶

³ Christ as our shield is a rich image worth expanding in another conversation. Like a shield, he absorbs shame (Isaiah 53:3); he casts our shame away (Hebrews 12:2); he makes shame powerless against us (Colossians 2:15).

⁴ The psalm sets the stage for this jump. Though I do not often give my exegetical reasoning for pulling in another passage during a counseling session, I am happy to explain it if asked. In a moment like this, it is more important to move seamlessly from the Lord lifting the head of the shamed to knowing his shining face upon them. In this particular passage the use of the word *glory* opens up the idea of radiance or shining (Hebrews 1:3; Revelation 21:11). If the Lord is our glory, it is because he is shining upon us (Numbers 6:25).

⁵ Exodus 34:29–35

⁶ The hymn *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus* fits well here and can be a helpful way for a counselee to recall this conversation throughout the week.

My friend bears physical marks of her shame, scars from self-inflicted wounds that remind her of shameful moments. They stand in accusation against her. In this moment, as she experienced the radiance of the glory of the Lord, she proclaimed, "His face is shining so brightly upon me that my scars are washed out." He truly removes her shame.

This was a dramatic moment for my friend. God does not always work in this way, but he did in this case and the experience has continued to bless and help her. This is not surprising. David says something similar. He says that he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord sustained him.⁷ In the following months, in places where fear and shame had once lured her to run and hide, my friend experienced the Lord's sustaining power that allowed her to faithfully believe that he removed her shame. We come back to this psalm often and praise the Lord for the big and small ways he sustains her.

⁷ Psalm 3:5–6: "I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around."

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