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Faith and Shame

Is there a connection between faith and shame? We might not think to put them together, but the Bible does. In this article I'd like to explore the relationship between faith and shame by way of a brief meditation on Psalm 25.

In verse 2 the psalmist writes, "In you I trust, O my God. Do not let me put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me." What does he mean? Does he simply mean, "Rescue me from my enemies; don't let them treat me shamefully"? I think there's more to it than that.

Trust makes you vulnerable

Psychology professor Randie Timpe writes that shame may originate from "threats to trust" (*Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling*). In other words, when your trust (your faith, your belief system) is threatened or contradicted by your circumstances, you may well begin to question the adequacy of your worldview. Trust makes you vulnerable, says Dr. Timpe, because something may happen that is inconsistent with what you believe. Someone may see the incongruity and expose it. You feel like a fool because it appears that your trust was misplaced, unfounded, inadequate. You become ashamed. ("What an idiot I was to believe that!") Your vulnerability has been uncovered, and you are in no position to defend your faith because your *situation* suggests that it doesn't hold water.

That kind of vulnerability is found in Psalm 25, too. On the one hand the psalmist knows what he believes. Verse 5: "You are God my Saviour." Verse 7: "You are good, O Lord." Verse 8: "Good and upright is the Lord." Verse 10: "All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful." So "the man who fears the Lord [will] spend his days in prosperity" (v. 13). That's what the psalmist believes.

On the other hand his circumstances seem to belie his faith. Verse 17: "The troubles of my heart have multiplied." Verse 19: "See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me!" Does the

incongruity make the psalmist abandon his faith? No, but he does pray, "Do not let me be put to shame." Here and elsewhere in Psalms (see 22:5, 31:1,17, 37:19, 44:8-15, 71:1-2, 119:114-116), to put someone to shame means to leave his prayer for deliverance unanswered, giving the impression that God is unwilling or unable to save, that the believer's confidence is misplaced.

There is another layer to faith and shame in this Psalm. The psalmist's *faith* says, "I trust in you," "you are God my Saviour," "my hope is in you," and "the Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them." In other words, he trusts that he's in a secure relationship with a God who saves. But again there's potential for *shame*: he also knows his sins. Verse 7: "Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways." Verse 11: "For the sake of your name, forgive my iniquity, though it is great." Verse 18: "Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins." In other words, the psalmist has jeopardized the very security of the relationship he depends upon. His faith is vulnerable. Nevertheless he does not abandon his faith, but he prays, asking God to keep the covenant relationship secure.

In short, the psalmist's answer to vulnerability is complete dependence on the very God who has put him at risk and made him vulnerable! It's a profound lesson that's well worth keeping in mind.

Wrestling with shame

In our lives there will be times when we experience the vulnerability of faith and have to wrestle with shame. We'll also have to help others who go through that experience, and it won't always be easy to reach out. Shame makes people go into hiding; they avoid help. It's not easy to build trust with vulnerable, hurting people. They won't quickly come to us with their hard questions. That's too risky. Nor are they likely to make a scene and leave church. After all, abandoning the faith also comes at a cost. There is the shame of losing

face with friends and family members. There is the fear of condemnation from church members, censure from office bearers, and judgment from a God who does not appear to care.

It's easier for hurting people simply to become disengaged, to give the right answers when the pastor asks how it's going, so that he goes away as soon as possible. It's easier simply to go through the outward motions of church attendance, with minimal involvement, and to withdraw from relationships, letting other members believe that they'd rather be on their own, and in the meantime developing alternate coping strategies to help them through life, since faith doesn't help anyway, and prayer is futile.

Restoring trust

Hurting people need us to seek them out with patient persistence. Not to do so would only confirm their sense that God has turned their faith into shame and does not answer prayer. They need us to demonstrate the loyalty and love, the willingness to

associate that Psalm 25 speaks about, so that via our willingness to reach out and relate they see evidence that love, loyalty, and covenant are still possible, still real, and that God is still loving and faithful, upright, and good. We need to be the evidence that God hears them and cares for them. Of course, if their faith were to depend on our love for them, it would have a fragile foundation, so we must point always to Christ. We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

Christ personifies the message of Psalm 25. The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame (Ps 25:3, Isa 28:16, Rom 9:33, 1 Pet 2:6). Through the storms of life, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8). He also knows what it is to have one's faith put to the test. He experienced the shame of unanswered prayer. He has paid for sin to make our relationship with God secure. He gives his Spirit to help and to heal.

In short, we must bring hurting, vulnerable Christians to the prayer of Psalm 25, because then we bring them to Christ – the answer to that prayer. 

