

## Chapter 2



# WHAT SHAME?

*In counseling today, Michelle introduced the word shame. She suggested it was at the root of a lot of my struggles. Since I've been familiar with my issues a lot longer than she has, I kindly disagreed. I shook my head and told her I didn't struggle with shame. She asked if I knew what shame was. I said, "Shame is what you feel when you've done something wrong. And I know I've done a lot of wrong things in my life, but I don't think I'm carrying around shame."*

*With a slight grin, she took out a piece of paper and began writing. A few moments later, she handed it to me and asked that I read it before coming back next week. I folded it and put it in my purse. Part of me didn't want to acknowledge it. After I left her office, though, I opened it up and began reading. It was shocking. It felt like I was looking into a mirror. I identified with everything written on the page. I saw myself. And I began to cry.*

*I thought I was here to learn how to like myself.  
Now, I have a sinking feeling that the journey  
forward is going to require me to go back first.  
Back to where shame was first planted in my  
heart, there to grow in the darkest places of how  
I thought of myself.*

*I want to run and hide. But I've done that for  
years, and it hasn't helped. My prayer today is a  
plea: "God, help me stay. Help me look back. Help  
me walk forward. I trust You."*

*- Sandi*

I didn't realize it at the time, but counseling was an invitation. An open door into discovery. Isn't it ironic that on one hand we know ourselves better than anyone else, but on the other, we often can't see what is right in front (or inside) of us? I reached out to Michelle because I was at a loss. I knew something was wrong, but I had no idea what it was or what to do about it.

It didn't take long for a complete stranger to identify shame as one of my warning lights. I had no idea. Then all of a sudden, hidden pain and shame, tucked deep into the crevasses of my heart, were being invited into the light to explore, understand, and challenge with the truth. If shame hides in the dark, it was time to turn on the light and usher in some honest reflection. Easier said than done, by the way.

Michelle said my visceral reaction to what she wrote about shame meant we were getting somewhere. Little did I know that “getting somewhere,” in counselor code, means “you’re just scratching the surface.” She could have just as easily said, “Buckle up, it’s about to get bumpy.”

At the center of the page Michelle had handed me, she wrote my name: SANDI. Around my name (like a triangle) she wrote three words: trauma, abuse, abandonment. She explained that I am who God created me to be (at the core), but I have also been shaped by my past experiences. These events cause imprints of shame on my life. Because of our pasts, we learn defenses, cover-ups, and masks that work their way out into behaviors.

Below the “triangle of shame” she jotted down:

- Stuffed feelings
- Perfectionism
- Humor to cover up problems
- Problem-fixing behavior
- Approval seeking
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Drive to perform
- Living constantly on guard
- Waiting for the betrayal that is sure to come



“Does any of that sound familiar?” she asked. I remember thinking, How does she know me so well? We just met! Yet she described me with 100 percent accuracy.

While discussing the sheet of paper in her office, I felt exposed and confused. It made me feel a bit uncomfortable. I couldn’t sit still. I fidgeted with a tissue in my hand. Moved my feet. Readjusted my position, crossed my legs. Perhaps I kept squirming because it felt like she was hunting, searching for something, and I hoped she couldn’t zero in if the target kept moving. I didn’t like the words shame, trauma, abuse, abandonment. I had never thought of my life in those terms. I didn’t like the idea that any of those were part of my past or still having an impact on my life today. I wanted to deny it, but we both knew it was true. I wanted to quit and not talk about it anymore, but I knew that wouldn’t help. So instead, I sat there and cried.

Michelle asked why talking about shame caused such a strong reaction. I didn't know the answer. But I said the first thing that came to mind: "Shame sounds awful, and I don't want to admit that it's part of my life. If shame is bad and I am dealing with shame, then we both know what that means. Now you know what I've known all along. That's why I don't like myself."

Her response was stunning to me. She could have preached to me, reminding me that God loves me and I need to love myself, too, or agreed with me that I was a lost cause (which was a distinct possibility in my mind). Instead, she said, "Sandi, what if the conclusions you've drawn about yourself aren't rooted in truth? Wouldn't you want to know? Is it possible that you've latched on to something that isn't true, but you believe it is?"

That got my attention. For two reasons. First, I value truth, and the thought that I had believed a lie for so long was unsettling. Second, her strategic question left no space for shame to chime in. It wasn't about what I felt. It was about seeking truth. She was challenging my negative thoughts but was also inviting me into the process. I didn't feel like she was on one side and I was on the other. She invited me into the journey of discovery. And her question lingered with me. Was it possible?

Part of me wanted to believe it was possible, part of me doubted, and part of me was curious. What if she's right? What is shame? Where does it come from? Will it always whisper or shout at me? How can I tell the difference between

shame and truth? Have I latched on to the wrong one?

With all of this swirling around in my mind, I said, “Michelle, I guess it is possible that my conclusions about myself aren’t truthful. But I’m not convinced you’re right. I know what I know.” The evidence seemed clear and convincing. Even though my mind knew otherwise, in my heart the verdict had already been rendered: I was worthless.

As I look back at that conversation with Michelle, it was as if she had declared a retrial on my behalf. She wanted me to take an objective look at the evidence. This time, there would be no shameful prosecutor taking the lead. We were going to go back and look at everything with a new lens. It seemed like a tall mountain to climb. The thought of it was overwhelming. And the mere thought of something in my past still wreaking havoc in my life today angered me. I believed I was stronger than that. More resilient. In frustration, I said, “How lame is that? I’ve got a great life. I never think about my past. I’m mad at myself for letting anything in my past disrupt the good things in my life today. I’m so stupid.”

Yes, stupid. That was a pet word of mine that I uttered a lot in counseling. I would never call someone else stupid. Yet it rolled so easily off of my tongue as I described myself. Time and time again. Why is it that we say things to ourselves that we would never say to anyone else? Because shame convinces us of things that aren’t true—that’s why. And shame was speaking clearly and loudly that day. What I heard from shame was, “You’re stupid.”

Thankfully, what I heard from Michelle was, “You’re carrying both pain and shame. You know one as fact but believe the other to be true. And that’s something we can work on.”



UNPACKING THE PROCESS  
WITH DR. MICHELLE

## Speaking Back to Shame

If emotions such as joy, gratitude, peace, and compassion are the flowers of your garden, then shame is the perennial weed stealing nutrients from your beautifully intended life. Shame is more than self-doubt or a low self-esteem or the acknowledgment that you messed up. It fundamentally says to your heart and mind: “I am a bad person.” It causes us to want to shrink away, hide, become even smaller than we feel.

Shame is also one of the most misunderstood and neglected emotions we carry. For one thing, we are often unaware of its presence and influence, and that, sadly, allows this unattended weed to grow and flourish in our lives. Even more, when we experience that lightbulb moment with shame, as Sandi did, it creates a powerful and emotional response and may evoke a desire to walk away from the healing process. But it’s imperative that we don’t. Shame may be one of the most common and destructive emotions we have, and seeing it for

what it is—the thorniest of weeds—is key before healing can begin.

What do we need to know about shame to identify it correctly, and how do we know when we're carrying it? Shame tries to—and often succeeds at—hiding in the dark. It not only hides, but it festers and grows over time as well. As it does, it convinces us of things about ourselves that aren't true:

- I'm not pretty.
- I can't be honest about my feelings.
- If they knew the real me, they wouldn't like me.
- I'm not worthy of this friendship.
- I'll never be good enough.
- I don't matter.
- I'm bad.
- There's just something fundamentally broken in me.

Can you hear any of those messages of shame in your head? Perhaps those voices feel louder than God's or louder than the positive ones telling you that you're okay, that you're trying your hardest, that you are still worthy.

Shame is a deeply destructive emotional and relational pest. It's the weapon the enemy of our soul uses to (1) corrupt our relationship with God, ourselves, and one another and (2) prevent us from using the gifts God has given us. Shame can



be profoundly rooted in childhood messages, as Sandi eventually began to realize from her own story of abandonment and trauma. Those messages lie deep within our brains and our bodies, and can run quietly underneath the surface until they can't be held in any longer.

No one wants to recognize shame in herself, and that's exactly where the enemy wants to keep you. Here's the hard news: we all have some measure of shame. It's something we've all experienced, from the surface-level (such as that slight embarrassment at tripping over a step) to deep humiliation or rejection (a betrayal by a parent or spouse, for example).

Curt Thompson, in his book titled *The Soul of Shame*, notes that there are two ways that shame manifests itself in our lives:

## **Hidden Shame**

This is the shame you keep to yourself. This can be reflected in the assumption that no one will like you if they knew who you really are. You think, How could someone else like me when I don't even like me? All the while, no one knows your daily struggle of hiding behind a mask of seeming perfection. This can cause a distancing in relationships, a result of protecting yourself—and others—from seeing just how bad you are. When Sandi came into the office for one of our first sessions, she said, "I know my husband and kids love me, but I don't feel it." Shame caused a barrier between what she rationally knew

(that her family loves her because of their words and actions) and what she could accept as feasible in her heart.

## Visible Shame

This one shows up as the critical spirit. Oh boy, that one, the one Jesus warned us about when He said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” (Matthew 7:1). We react to our shame by turning it outward on others. We might even think we’re being critical in the name of accountability, but in reality, we are projecting our own shame in expecting perfection from others. Either way, inwardly or outwardly, we act out our shame. It may show up in the absence of trusted relationships: Shame has told us that no one can be trusted, and because of that, our relationships are riddled with feelings of potential abandonment and rejection. Shame may also tell us we’re not worthy of love from others, so we shy away from deep connections. The outward signs of shame can manifest in all sorts of coping behaviors: using too much alcohol to quiet that negative voice, or by overworking ourselves in ministry to prove we are worthy to others and God . . . the ways are manifold.

Why is it so hard to admit we might have some shame? As Christians, it’s hard to come close to evil. We have—and we should have—this natural adverse reaction to not wanting to be associated with anything of the enemy. So, we shy away from acknowledging it. But at the same time, we are living in the darkness of not seeing it for what it is. Who it is: the soul destroyer, the light stealer, the mask maker.

Doubt, comparison, feeling inadequate, inner anger, or rage leak out. We're unsettled, and we don't know why. We are peace-deprived. Oh, those needy, shameful weeds, sucking the life, joy, and peace right out of our minds and hearts.

Others look at us and see the outward beauty: smiles, family, successes. They see the flowers. They are certainly part of our garden, but we see and feel the weeds creeping underneath, causing us to feel fake. We feel like we can't be honest with others about what lurks below for fear that we'll be viewed as bad people. If others knew about the weeds, wouldn't they reject us? And so, the weeds grow in the dark and the silence.

You may not even know the kinds of weeds in your life. You may simply know that something is off and unsettled. You may feel the effects of being emotionally malnourished. You may feel like you are dangerously close to a tipping point or a blowout. You may feel caught in a loop of indecision or loss of motivation. You may see your life being robbed of joy and your relationships being negatively impacted.

What do you do with all of that?

You are invited to begin to confront shame. Honestly, this is one of the most taxing parts. Confronting shame is hard work. Acknowledging that shame has been whispering (or shouting) in your ear is not easy. Nor is identifying what shame is saying and holding it accountable to the truth of God's love. This is an ongoing process, one that may be wrestled with for years to come as triggers are identified and truth continues

to be revealed in the face of convincing lies. In my years of counseling, I've found a pattern that's somewhat unique to shame. It's that many of my clients know (cognitively) that God loves them and that He accepts them, but the heart—oh, the heart!—is a whole other matter. The heart wants to hold on to the shame. It wants to believe the lies because that's what it's done for so very long. And there's safety in believing something, even if it's harmful. It may be what you've always known, until now.

Shame, in this broken world, may always have a voice. It was present in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve hid from God, and it still lingers with us today. But we are not without hope or a defense. We can diminish shame's influence by seeing it for what it is: a whisper from the father of lies intended to wound the soul (see John 8:44).

The enemy knows there is power in the spoken word. God used His voice during creation to speak the world into existence. His Word is still alive, active, and powerful as it speaks into our lives (see Hebrews 4:12). On the other side, the enemy uses his voice to condemn, confuse, and shame.

But you, too, have a voice. Are you ready to use it? Are you ready to speak honestly to the Lord, to the enemy, and to yourself? It may feel awkward and unfamiliar. But one of the biggest and bravest steps toward bringing the brain and heart into alignment is to say it out loud: "I feel shame because \_\_\_\_\_ (insert shameful yuck here)." Don't stop there, however. Continue: "But I choose to believe the truth:

I am loved.”

If you're sitting in a room by yourself, say it out loud. Declare the emotion. Bring it out into the light of day. Say it to the Lord. He is listening keenly to you, and He desires freedom from the shame that has held you in a place of darkness for so long. It is time!

Psalm 34:5 proclaims, “Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.” You're taking a big step. You're leaning in and inviting God to shine His light into your heart and mind. As you encounter shame, hurt, and lies, you do so with the unconditional love of your Father, who not only reveals truth but has given you a voice to speak truth as well:

Today, I acknowledge that I struggle with shame.

Today, I accept the invitation to confront shame, both visible and hidden.

Today, I choose to believe that I am loved.

Today, I look to the Lord. Because of His light in my life, I am radiant and accept the freedom from shame that He is offering.

Today, I will walk in the truth of discovery and healing.



## REFLECTION

Shame has the potential to make us go silent, to be caught in this endless cycle after a painful event. For one, we believe the lie that the hurt or failure defines us, and then second, shame convinces us that we can never recover. On and on until shame is spoken and brought into the light of truth. This chapter has challenged that message and, hopefully, helped you name the shame. In this time of reflection, dig a bit further into the root of your shame, and begin to use the scripture and prayer included below to soothe the shame.

**What kind of reaction do you have when you think of shame?**

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**Do you see any evidence of shame at work in your life? How has it affected the thoughts you have about yourself? How has it prevented you from engaging fully in relationships? With yourself? With others? With God?**

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Can you begin to identify the roots of your feelings of shame? They may come from an early message from a parent, a friend in middle school, or an abusive spouse. You may be able to pinpoint one message or a collection of them that you heard many times. Who did it come from? What message did it send to you that feels covered in shame?

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What is one truth that you can begin to replace one shameful message with? For example, exchanging "I deserve to be rejected" with "I am acceptable and accepted." It's okay if you don't fully believe it (yet). Identifying it and writing it down are the first steps.

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## SCRIPTURE

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight."

— PROVERBS 3:5–6

"As Scripture says, 'Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.'"

— ROMANS 10:11

"Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame."

— ISAIAH 50:7

## PRAYER

*God, I confess that I have felt more shame than freedom. More shame than joy. More shame than anything else at times. But, Lord, I ask that You help me out from under the weight of shame. Share Your flintlike strength in the face of lies, and help me resolutely replace them with Your truth, that I am not disgraced because of Your mercy and grace. I know I will not be put to shame because of Your love! Amen.*



