

An Alphabet to Reframe Shame

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] Well now I understand most Bach experts reckon that this is the earliest, certainly the earliest surviving of Bach's cantatas written in Arnstadt, which means that he wrote it between the ages of 19 and 20, which is deeply concerning for me, as I'm a very old man.

It is complex and beautiful and he relies heavily on the fugue, which is a complicated technique of bringing music and words together under control so that they might express the deepest, most profound emotion in the worship of the most wonderful God.

And all cantatas, all his cantatas, Bach wrote to be used in church because music he viewed as a servant of the scriptures. So he'd take a piece of the Bible and meditate on it and we have his Bible and he writes notes in the column around his Bible and this particular cantata is built around Psalm 25.

So if you would turn back in your service sheet to just follow along, we're going to have a look at Psalm 25 pages 6 and 7. Psalm 25 is an alphabet.

It's an acrostic where each successive verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And I've called it an alphabet to reframe shame.

[1 : 3 2] Because the entire Psalm is about shame, naming it and reframing it. In the first chorus in the cantata, the word for shame is translated confounded, but it actually means shame.

And the Psalm is a shame sandwich. The first few verses, shame, shame, shame, three times and then again at the end in verse 20. And the Psalm opens to us what is wrong with the human race in short order.

Why we do what we do. Why we are unhappy with ourselves. Why we're so selfish and insecure and anxious and ready to blame others.

And it goes to the root and it tells us that God's opened a new way for us to reframe shame and to create a genuine connection between himself and us and ourselves and each other.

Because we were made for connection. That's why we're here. It's the reason, it's the purpose and meaning in life. But you see, there's one thing that infallibly unravels connection and it is shame.

[2 : 4 6] I am afraid that if you see me as I really am, I will not be worthy of your connection. I am not, put yourself here, I'm not rich enough, fit enough, smart enough, tall enough, short enough, wide enough, thin enough.

It's a universal experience. And the less you talk about it, the more it grows. Shame is an excruciating painful sense that there is something wrong with me.

And it's very different from guilt. Guilt is I've done something wrong, I've done something bad. Shame is I am wrong, I am bad. Guilt is focused on the action, whereas shame is focused on my identity, who I am.

And both of them are universal. But of the two, I think shame is deeper and more complex. Because if guilt is about what I do, my actions, shame is about my identity, not just what I've done, but who I am.

And it's shame that cuts me off from other people and undermines genuine connection. Because I desperately need to hide who I am and my own sense of vulnerability and shame from you.

[4 : 03] And the easiest to hand method of dealing with shame is to shame others. In fact, you can tell the people who feel the most shame because they are the most ready and able in shaming others constantly.

And at the risk of overgeneralising, the experts say that broadly speaking, Eastern cultures tend to be shamed-based, whereas our Western culture tends to be guilt-based.

Because in the guilt... Sorry, in the guilt. Okay. In the West... In the West, we're far more evolved. We think this is a much more advanced feeling, guilt, than shame.

And guilt thrives in an individualistic culture because good and bad is determined by my individualistic choice.

Whereas shame cultures thrive in collectivist cultures where good and bad depends on what your community says about you. The Western solution to guilt is self-esteem.

[5 : 12] Shame. The Eastern solution to shame is honour. People will think highly of me. And there are great strengths and terrible weaknesses in both approaches.

But neither of them really work because neither of them go to the root of the problem. See, the guilt compass is notoriously unreliable. We all know people who struggle with massive false guilt for things they shouldn't feel guilty about.

And we probably have people in our lives who ought to feel guilty about things, but they don't, right? The most extreme example are the Nuremberg war trials.

Those most responsible for the atrocities and horrors of the concentration camps in Germany testified they had absolutely clean consciences in what they were doing. But the shame compass is also completely unreliable.

Your shame compass is completely set by what your group thinks. If you belong to a gang, it'll go this way. I mean, the mafia is a wonderful example of a shame-based culture.

[6 : 17] Andy Crouch, who is a social commentator and writer, points out that there is a shift going on in our post-modern culture in the West. And the shift is from an individualistic, guilt-based culture to a fame-shame culture.

Seven years ago, they did extensive tests with children and pre-teens in school in the United States and Canada and the UK, and they asked them what they aspire to when they grow up.

And the kids aspire generally to professions, to be an astronaut, to be with the fire department, to be, you know, with the police. They've redone the tests in the last year, and the number one value that children and pre-teens aspire to is fame.

And the great dread is to be publicly shamed on the internet. If you have children who are 13, those children have never been in a world without the internet or social media.

And our personal screens are constantly updating us and promising us approval and belonging and constantly bringing with them the danger of public exclusion and hostility and shaming.

[7 : 35] It's kind of an irony, isn't it, that the very technology and tools which offer us instant fame and celebrity also are the same tools that threaten public humiliation and shame to destroy us.

And I think we're probably more vulnerable to that because we live in an individualistic culture. We have a lack of rich communal belonging. Shame is a universal problem.

And the psalm does two things. It names the shame and it reframes the shame. And I just want to look at psalm for a few minutes with you to show you how it works. So how does the psalm firstly name shame?

Well, it shows the complexity of shame. It says shame has three separate dimensions. External, what other people think about me. Internal, what I think of myself.

And spiritual, what God thinks about me. You look at the psalm for the external shame. David, who is the author of the psalm, speaks about enemies. These are people who want to put him to shame.

[8 : 40] So in verse 2, Oh my God, in you I trust. Let me not be put to shame. Let not my enemies rise up over me. Verse 19, Consider how many are my foes and with what violent hatred they hate me.

You see, they're generally not specified these enemies. But what they're trying to do is by fierce control and cruelty and bullying, they're trying to gain above David, to get above David by dishonoring and shaming him.

They're working to exclude him somehow and to reduce his status and to expose his vulnerability. And later he says, I feel like the loneliest man in the world. That's how shame works.

That's how external shame works. It excludes. It controls. And it creates estrangement from others. Isolation and disconnection from community.

But you know, if that's all shame was, I think we could deal with it. But secondly, shame is also internal. David experiences estrangement and disconnection from himself with his own heart.

[9 : 49] It's a very painful reality that one of the results of external shaming is internalizing it and we also have our own internal shame. You can see this in just about any part of the psalm.

Look down to verse 16 as he describes it. He says to God, Turn to me and be gracious to me. I am lonely. I am afflicted. The troubles of my heart are enlarged.

Bring me out of my distress as plural. Consider my affliction and my trouble. David is aware of his own imperfections and his own weaknesses and that he has not even lived up to his own expectations.

See? He's struggling not just with the sense that I've done bad things, but I've done them because of who I am. I am corrupt and I am ashamed. But it's the third dimension that's the most important and that is the spiritual.

Because the deepest and most painful shame of all is the sense of estrangement and disconnection from God himself. And at the root of this is sin.

[10 : 56] So verse 7 at the beginning, for example, Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions. Verse 11, For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great.

Verse 18, Forgive all my sins. This troubles David much more than all the others because six times he mentions his sin in this psalm.

Not because he's a religious masochist, but he knows that the Bible teaches that at the root of all shame is sin and disconnection from God and he knows he cannot fix it on his own.

It's futile to try and deal with shame completely independently of God. And that's why he nails this this very important statement in verse 3 at the beginning of the psalm.

He says, None who hope or wait for you shall be put to shame. Now, the first mention of shame in the Bible is the lovely and happy statement in the creation narrative of the absence of shame.

[11 : 59] Remember? Before sin entered the world, the first man and the first woman were in each other's presence. And we read, They were naked and not ashamed. And that points to a state of mind.

There was openness and authentic connection completely without shame, completely without anything corrupting. It was innocent. They didn't have a sense of unworthiness or exposure.

What's the first thing that happens when sin comes into the world? They instantly get a new state of mind that is controlled now by guilt and by shame. Instantly, they know they are naked and you know what they do?

They hide and they cover themselves with fig leaves. And God comes walking in the garden and they hide in the bushes. And God says, Where are you? And Adam comes out and he says, I was naked and ashamed and I was frightened and I'm hiding from you.

And God says, Who told you you were naked? I mean, you were naked yesterday when we had a walk. Have you eaten of the tree? And he says, Well, the woman you gave me, actually you're to blame.

[13 : 06] And he asks the woman, she says, Well, the snake is to blame. Because you see, both guilt and both shame are the instant effect of sin. Sin disconnects us from God, from his approving, loving, glorious presence.

And now our connection with each other has changed too. Now it's about power. It's about control. I cannot be vulnerable with you. I have to control what you know about me because if you know too much about me, you're going to have power over me.

And so the way we deal with our shame and the way we deal with our guilt is we blame someone else. We shame someone else because it's a great way to take focus off my own shame and it makes me feel better. It makes me feel more righteous.

It's like when people say, I'm as good as that person. That's not what they mean. And so we hide. We justify ourselves in our own mind and we throw each other under the bus.

And this is the result of sin. Our inner sense of shame comes from this and all our self-righteous shaming of others comes from this. And so instead of vulnerability and love, I have to cover myself from you and you have to cover yourself from me.

[14 : 28] I mean, I can't let you see me as I really am because you'll reject me. I have to control that information. And how I do that is I create all sorts of fig leaves to impress you that I'm not really as bad as I think I am.

And this is how the psalm names shame. It says that outside the Garden of Eden, it's a fundamental, fundamental part of human life and it affects our understanding of ourselves, our connection with each other and our connection with God at the root of those, this stain, this stain of sin.

So secondly then, how does the psalm reframe shame? And I think the most obvious thing to say is that the psalm is a prayer.

It's full of specific requests of David to God because the simple fact is we can't deal with this shame on our own. We can't deliver ourselves.

We can't lift ourselves out of guilt and shame. We can pretend for a while. But it doesn't come from doing all those mental exercises which make you try and not worry about what other people think.

[15 : 37] It doesn't come with techniques because you're still stuck with what you think. Nor does it come from all sorts of positive self-talk or even safe relationships.

None of those things remove the stain. It comes from God alone. So in verse 20, wonderful request. David prays, God, my soul and deliver me.

Let me not be put to shame for I take refuge in you. I take refuge in you. I'm putting my hope in you because if God, you don't answer my prayer, I'm lost.

That's why he stated for himself, verse three, none who hope in you or wait for you shall be put to shame but they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

The word wantonly is one of the favourite words that Dan uses around the office and he's happy to explain it to anyone afterwards. I'm more interested in the word treacherous.

[16 : 41] The word treacherous means deceitful. It literally means those whose external life is different from their internal life. Those who are deliberately covering their shame, who are deflecting shame by achievement or beauty or finding a life partner or finding what's wrong with others and it doesn't work because it's all fig leaves.

We're so deeply immersed in this, we find it very hard to see and David is aware of his own self-deception. It's wonderful.

He talks about walking like into a net, verse 15. My eyes are toward the Lord. He's going to pluck my feet out of the net. Did you notice, by the way, when Bach was writing the music around the net, was that a chorale or a something?

Aria? We heard it. It was a chorus. When it comes to the net section, what happens is that the melody line unhooks and rolls over like this.

So there are two melody lines now and the orchestra unhooks itself from the choir and changes timing and starts to syncopate.

[17 : 51] It's a great picture of what it is to have your feet caught in a net. And that's what it's like to be caught in shame. David Brooks, who is a very well-known writer, has a column in the New York Times, just finished a book called The Road to Character, Why Celebrity Doesn't Make You Happy.

He's a celebrity or he says, I make my money being a narcissistic blowhard. He says, none of us are strong enough, I quote, to control ourselves against self-deception, self-indulgence or self-centeredness.

It doesn't come from iron will or self-control push-ups. And I think he's right about that because the root cause is something only God can deal with.

If you're with me, stay with me on this. Because what we need is this. We need someone who has the power not just to cover my shame and my sin and deal with it, but who will love me as I am in the midst of my guilt and shame.

I need both of those things. I need someone who will approve of me despite my failings, not because of performance or contribution, who will honor me but at the same time deal with my shame and my sin.

[19 : 09] Because if the root connection is sin and has to do with my disconnection from God, we have to pray like David here that God will release our feet from the net.

And this reframing of shame is quite astonishing. David says in verse 14, God is willing to take us into his closest, most intimate confidence. Verse 14, the friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him.

Friendship is not the word here. It's not the usual word. This idea is of being tight, compressed, closely connected for the sake of communion together.

It's the picture of two heads bowed toward each other sharing intimate secrets commonly. It's confidential heart sharing. It's opening to another without fear.

It's opening to another without reserve, without holding back, without rejection. It's a connection without shame or guilt and it's what we long for. And the reason this happens in verse 8 is because God is good and upright, good and upright together.

[20 : 23] I mean, if God was just upright, all he'd have for us was guilt and shame. And if he was just good, perhaps he might accept us, but our guilt and shame would not be dealt with. But he is both. He is upright.

He will not ignore and do away with sin. He does deal with it properly. But because he is good, he has found a way to deal with my sin and to bind himself to me again.

And the only way that he did it was to make himself vulnerable to us. Look at how David speaks about it. In verse 6 and 7, there are three remembers, three remembers, three remembers.

Verse 6, Remember your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love, for they have been from a vault. And now listen, listen, God separates us from our sin. Look at this.

Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgression, but according to your steadfast love, remember me for the sake of your goodness, O Lord.

[21 : 22] So God makes a way to distinguish between the person and the sin. David says, remember not my sins, but remember me for your goodness. Deal with the root of my shame, but please bring me into honour.

But it doesn't happen automatically, of course. We're so used to living behind our fig leaves, it's almost like we don't know what to do without shame. But it requires we do this, we tell the truth about ourselves, which is not easy, because to tell the truth about yourself is to lose control.

yesterday I heard the wonderful testimony of a man called Patiti Emanuel in Rwanda. He participated in the 1994 genocide, he murdered many Tutsis, he spent years in prison and community service, and in prison he heard the Christian gospel through an alpha group, and he says, and I quote, I struggled to tell the truth about what I had done.

Imagine the shame. He said, how am I going now to live among genocide survivors? My heart was filled with agony, loneliness, and fear.

And he says, I learned that Jesus forgives and experienced love in a way I had never known before. So when he was released, he found the man, his name is Vincent, whose mother and grandmother he had killed to ask him for forgiveness.

[22 : 57] And now Patiti lives in the village with genocide survivors and genocide perpetrators, along with Vincent, who has forgiven him. They are friends. And he says, I have found forgiveness and healing for the things that I have done and a peace I never knew.

It's interesting, the great struggle for Patiti was to tell the truth, but when he did, what a relief it was, and it opened a door for true connection. We have to expose ourselves to God as we really are, which means giving control to him, losing control of the information about yourself.

This is the most radical reframing of shame. It is to allow God to take responsibility for my guilt and my shame. and it is the message of the Bible that he chooses to act, to expose himself to my shame and my guilt and all that comes from that, the isolation and the rejection and the exclusion.

And this is why Jesus came and as he dies on the cross, what God is doing is he is dealing with our guilt and shame so that we might be reconciled to him. Jesus absorbs all our shame, all our guilt.

And then God turns around and gives to us all the glory and the forgiveness and the honour that belongs to Jesus. He raises us into the status and glory of being children of God.

[24 : 30] And that opens the door for true connection. And through the cross, God creates a community where weakness and need are highly valued.

Boasting and competition is not highly valued. Where serving is a way of privilege. And where the ultimate shame and dishonour through the cross becomes the place of our eternal glory and our eternal connection with God and with each other.

So, the psalm says the remedy for our shame is not becoming famous. It's not winning all the affirmation from people around you. It's not believing steadfastly in yourself.

It's allowing God to take shame and guilt, telling him the truth about yourself and then setting all your hopes on him. Because the psalm says, no one who hopes in God will ever be put to shame.

Amen. Amen.