

Shame in the Hands of a Truthful God

Psalm 31:1–24

Stuart Chase

In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me! Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me! For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me; you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD. I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul, and you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad place.

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbours, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.

But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God." My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors! Make your face shine on your servant; save me in your steadfast love!

O LORD, let me not be put to shame, for I call upon you; let the wicked be put to shame; let them go silently to Sheol. Let the lying lips be mute, which speak insolently against the righteous in pride and contempt.

Oh, how abundant is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you and worked for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of the children of mankind! In the cover of your presence you hide them from the plots of men; you store them in your shelter from the strife of tongues. Blessed be the LORD, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was in a besieged city. I had said in my alarm, "I am cut off from your sight." But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy when I cried to you for help. Love the LORD, all you his saints! The LORD preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride. Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD!

(Psalm 31:1–24)

Introduction

In late March of 2013, Adria Richards, an employee of an email delivery company, was at a technology conference when she overheard two male developers making what she interpreted as sexist jokes. Rather than saying anything directly to the men, she surreptitiously took a photo of

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them and tweeted it out with her accusation of the alleged sexist comments. An event organiser immediately spotted the tweet and approached the two men, who admitted that their comments could be construed as being in poor taste and apologised.

That might have been the end of the story, but it was not to be. Instead, the situation quickly escalated (in the words of one journalist) “like a sexist snowball rolling down a hyper-sensitive mountain.”

Ms. Richards blogged about her experience so as to publicly shame the men. One of the men was immediately fired by his employer, and a firestorm erupted. Some members of the public were incensed by what they perceived to be Ms. Richards’s oversensitivity, while others jumped to her defence. A group of hackers who felt that she had overreacted resorted to a digital attack on the email servers of her employer. The IT department at the company spent hours trying to counter the attack and restore service to its customers, before the company eventually announced that it had terminated Ms. Richards’s employment with immediate effect. This, of course, only raised the debate to new levels.

One article covering the debacle summarised it perfectly: “One tweet. Thousands of comments. Four days later, two people have been fired. Welcome to the digital age.” Welcome to the digital age indeed, where public shaming has a knack of spinning spectacularly out of control.

Public shaming has always been considered an effective form of punishment. We see this even in Bible days. When Jeremiah preached a message that offended the religious leaders of his day, “Pashhur the priest ... beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the LORD” (Jeremiah 20:1–2). This was a public place, and the stocks were placed there to heighten the shame of the one being punished. Roman crucifixion was likewise designed to do bring public shame upon the crucified.

There was a time when public shaming was implemented by authorities, but today anyone with an Internet connection has the power to publicly shame others. I was recently involved in an online discussion that arose after a woman sued a church because she had been “shamed” by being asked to use the church’s mothers’ room for nursing. One commenter on the story suggested that, while the woman was wrong to sue the church, the church should absolutely be “shamed.”

I would suggest that encouraging people to publicly shame others is ethically questionable to say the very least. If you have ever felt a sense of shame—and who among us has not?—you will know that it is not an easy thing to handle.

Psalm 31 is a psalm about shame. David was burdened with a sense of shame, and this was his prayer to the Lord to deliver him from that shame. If you know what it is to feel shame, I hope that this psalm will offer you some encouragement.

This psalm seems to be one that is not particularly well-known today. It is not one that is frequently cited. And yet its ability to encourage has been recognised by God’s people throughout the ages. This psalm was quoted by Jonah in the belly of the whale, by Jeremiah when he was oppressed, and by Jesus from the cross. John Huss, a Czech reformer, quoted Psalm 31 when he was burned at the stake. In the reign of Bloody Mary, one Bishop Hooper, imprisoned and awaiting execution,

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encouraged his wife to read this psalm (among others) as a source of consolation and encouragement.

Shame is the centrepiece of this psalm (vv. 1, 17; cf. v. 11—“a reproach”). Today, particularly in Western societies, we tend to think of shame in terms of feelings. That is a part of shame as it is understood in the Bible, but only a small part.

In Eastern cultures, both in Bible days and today, the concept of shame carried (and carries) a far weightier significance than it often does in ours. For us, shame is something intensely personal, and is often something felt in a moment, in a given circumstance. Perhaps you are caught in a particular sin, which becomes publicly known, and you personally feel the shame of having been outed. Even if it is a longer lasting shame, it is still for the most part something that is personally experienced.

Godless parents may heap shame upon their children, telling them they are worthless and will amount to nothing. A person who was sexually molested as a child may carry with them a profound sense of shame. When Jeffrey Dahmer was arrested for his crimes, his brother legally changed his surname so as not to be associated in any way with the Dahmer name. Shame like that can be carried for a lifetime, but, at least as we think of it, it is still something that is personally felt.

While there are commonalities between shame as we understand it and the deeper kind of shame that the Bible knows, the shame we experience differs from biblical shame in at least two ways.

First, biblical shame was intricately tied to family and larger culture. Your actions brought shame not only on you, but on your entire family or culture. This is still true today in Eastern cultures. Ask someone who converts to Christianity from a strong Jewish or Muslim background about the shame that it brings to their family. I recently read of a Muslim man who placed a ransom his son’s head after he converted to Christianity because of the shame it brought on the family.

In *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, Nabeel Quereshi tells the story of his gradual exposure to the gospel and eventual conversion to Christianity. He was painfully aware of the ramifications a conversion to Christianity would have. “The impending pain was daunting. I knew the cost I was about to pay, but I did not know what it would look like. Would Ammi [his mother] and Abba [his father] hate me? Would they kick me out of the family? Would they die from heartbreak? This last one seemed most likely to me.” When he eventually told his parents of his conversion, his father “spoke these words through palpable pain: ‘Nabeel, this day I feel as if my backbone has been ripped out from inside me.’” His mother spoke even less: “Why have you betrayed me, Billoo?” His mother spent the night in a nearby hospital.

Second, for us, shame is something that is experienced and can be forgotten in death. In fact, people in Western societies who experience a sense of shame often feel that suicide is a way out. For us, death is an escape from shame; for biblical characters (and those in the East today), shame carried (and carries) weight beyond the grave.

This truth can be illustrated in the closing chapter of Isaiah. Isaiah tells of God’s judgement coming upon Jerusalem (which judgement is used in the New Testament to foreshadow final judgement). He writes in the closing verses:

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For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD. And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

(Isaiah 66:22–24)

The word translated “abhorrence” in v. 24 is used only one other time in the Old Testament, where it is translated as “shame” (Daniel 12:2). But notice that the “abhorrence” or “shame” here is not experienced by the living, but is heaped upon “the dead bodies” of those who “rebelled” against the Lord. Dead bodies do not experience shame. Here, as divine judgement upon his enemies, God heaps post-mortem shame on them; they do not experience shame during life. But that was a significant thing in the Old Testament Eastern world.

For David, shame was not something that would be relieved by death. Jews did not want to be viewed with shame—either in life or in death. Shame was something very tangible to them. We don’t always understand that.

With that said, let’s not minimise the shame that we often carry in our Western societies. The shame with which we are familiar as South Africans is not exactly the same as the shame experienced by ancient (or contemporary) Hebrews, but it is also not entirely distinct. This psalm has a great deal to say to us about shame as we experience it.

Before we delve into the text, it may be helpful to define shame as we know it. In his very helpful book, *Shame, Interrupted*, Ed Welch defines shame this way: “Shame is the deep sense that you are unacceptable because of something you did, something done to you, or something associated with you.” Notice the three possible sources of shame: (1) something you did; (2) something done to you; or (3) something associated with you (something about your circumstances).

As we will see, David’s sense of shame proceeded, in one form or another, from all three of these sources. He countered his shame with God’s truth. And he did so in a threefold way. He waged war against shame using three weapons: (1) the weapon of confidence (vv. 1–8); (2) the weapon of complaint (vv. 9–16); and (3) the weapon of courage (vv. 17–24). Let’s consider each of these weapons in turn and see what we can learn from this psalm about killing shame.

The Weapon of Confidence

The first weapon that David employs is that of confidence (vv. 1–8).

The way that this psalm is written is true to our day-to-day experiences in life. In one moment, David laments and cries to God for deliverance. The next moment, David is full of praise and confidence. Then, again, we find him in despair, before he breaks forth into praise again. Each of the three sections follows this pattern.

The Prayer

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David begins with a prayer.

In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me!
Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!
For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me; you take
me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

(Psalm 31:1–4)

Shame is the centrepiece of the section and the psalm. The key phrase here is: “Let me never be put to shame.” Everything else in this opening prayer, and indeed in the psalm, must be read in this light. “I take refuge” from shame. “Deliver me” from shame. “Rescue me speedily” from shame. “Be a rock of refuge for me” against shame. “A strong fortress to save me” from shame. “You are my rock and fortress” against shame. “You take me out of the net” of shame. “You are my refuge” from shame.

When David felt a deep sense of shame, he turned to God in prayer, pleading with God to fill him with confidence instead of shame. These opening verses are filled with pleas for God to be David's refuge and his rock and his fortress. These are symbols of confidence and strength and stability. In times of turmoil and warfare, you flee to a fortress for refuge and confidence. When things are shifting dangerously around you, you look to a rock for stability.

David knew that, under weight of shame, he needed to find his confidence outside of himself. When you are overwhelmed with shame, you need something outside of yourself to place your confidence in. You cannot meaningfully overcome shame by looking within.

An article detailing eight strategies for overcoming shade includes revisiting your childhood, recognising your triggers, practising self-compassion and challenging your thoughts. It suggests:

You can heal your shame when you are willing to feel your authentic feelings, rather than cover them up with anger or shame. When you learn to nurture yourself by being present with caring and compassion for your own existential feelings, you will no longer have a need to protect against these feelings with blame or shame.

Notice that all these things are about you. David looked elsewhere for confidence when he was burdened with shame. He realised that he must find his confidence in the Lord rather than in himself.

The way he did this is interesting: He appealed to the Lord based on what he already knew to be true about the Lord. He appeals, “Be a rock” (v. 2) and adds, “for you are my rock” (v. 3). He asks God to be “a strong fortress” (v. 2) because God is “my fortress” (v. 3). He prayed for God to be what he already knew him to be. Because he was committed to knowing God, when shame overwhelmed him, he knew where to look for confidence.

The key to being confident in God is to know God. You will never be confident in the Lord if you do not know the Lord. Do you strive to know God—through reading (the Bible and other God-oriented materials), through prayer, through corporate worship, through fellowship? Do you strive to do this when things are going well? If you want to be confident in God in times of turmoil and shame, you must learn to be confident in him when things are going well.

The Praise

David's commitment to finding confidence in God worked—at least for a moment.

Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD. I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul, and you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad place.

(Psalm 31:5–8)

David's prayer produced in him an immediate sense of relief so that he was able to commit himself to the Lord's hand and trust the faithful Lord for redemption from shame.

David praises the Lord because "you have redeemed me." He is not saying that the Lord had delivered him from shame in answer to this particular prayer, for he will still pray further (vv. 9ff). "Have redeemed" speaks of past deliverances. David's confidence that God would redeem him arose from his experience of past deliverances.

"I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols," he prays. The term "worthless idols" literally means "vain vanities." The phrase is frequently used in connection with idolatry. It stresses the utter worthlessness of those idols. These "worthless idols" could do nothing to deliver David from shame; on the other hand, Yahweh, the faithful God, could and would redeem him.

"Hate" here must be contrasted with "trust" in the second part of the verse. He hates not only the worthless idols, but also those who pay regard to those worthless idols. That is, he hates not only those things that cannot deliver from shame, but he even hates those who promote these worthless idols as sources of deliverance from shame. As Eveson says, "David wishes to make it clear that these idol worshippers were no friends of his and that he was in no way tempted to worship their gods." He distances himself from those who claim to have solutions to shame other than in the Lord.

There are all sorts of solutions to shame promoted by the world, but if the ultimate source is not the Lord, God's people should distance themselves from them. If you are being counselled to place confidence in something or someone other than the Lord, you are being counselled to trust in worthless idols. That is the type of counsel you should hate.

In vv. 7–8, David shows that, while the worthless idols and those who paid regard to them were powerless to help him, he could rejoice in the Lord's steadfast love. God understood his shame ("my affliction" and "the distress of my soul") and would deliver him. When David walked the tightrope between shame and despair, he trusted the Lord to set his feet on solid, wide ground. The confidence that he prayed for in vv. 1–4 he now experienced—at least momentarily—in vv. 5–8.

The Weapon of Complaint

The relief that David felt was not permanent, however, because in v. 9 we find him once again praying for deliverance from shame. "It's one thing to attain peace of mind, another to sustain it when under strain, as we now see" (Lane). In vv. 9–16, David wields the weapon of complaint.

I've labelled this section "complaint," not in a negative sense, but in the sense of David setting forth in detail his burdens. Here, David examines in detail both the sources and the consequences of his shame.

The Prayer

As in the first section, David begins with a prayer.

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbours, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.

(Psalm 31:9–13)

Remember that shame proceeds from one of three sources: (1) something you did; (2) something done to you; or (3) something associated with you. David here examines the source of the shame he feels and he comes to acknowledge that, really, it proceeds from all three sources.

As he details the sources of his shame, he admits, firstly, that it is because of something he did (vv. 9–10). Shame produced "distress," "grief," "sorrow" and "sighing"—and the source of all this was "my iniquity." I don't believe that he is speaking generally of his sinful human nature. Rather, he is acknowledging some specific guilt that produced shame in him. Because of that iniquity, "my bones waste away."

Second, David recognises that his shame was, in part, due to something that was being done to him—by his "adversaries," "neighbours," "acquaintances" and "those who see me in the street" (vv. 11–12). In other words, the world seemed to be conspiring against him: enemies, friends, acquaintances and strangers. Because of these people, he had become "a reproach" and others "flee from me."

But, third, David's shame was because of something associated with him (v. 13). His opponents were "whispering" as they conspired to "scheme together" against him. They whispered, "Terror on every side." Jeremiah quoted this verse at least six times, and eventually his enemies turned it against him as a source of mocking. It seems here that David's enemies, like Daniel's enemies in Daniel 6, were conspiring to find something with which to associate him so as to bring about his downfall. They would do so directly if possible (vv. 11–12), but if not they would find something about his circumstances to blame him (v. 13).

Shame brought David extremely low. Do you know what it is to be brought low by a sense of shame? Do you know what it is to be filled internally with "distress" and "grief" and "sorrow" and "sighing"? Do you know what it is to be (or feel as if you are) a "reproach" to others—friends, enemies, acquaintances and strangers? Do you know what it is to be (or feel as if you are) an object of God's scorn and chastening?

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If so, take it to the Lord in prayer! Set forth in detail your complaint to him. Combat shame with complaint: List the reasons that you feel shamed, and deal with each one accordingly. With David, honestly admit your own part in your shame (your “iniquity”) and repent (see below). With David, recognise how others are trying to shame you and hand it to the Lord (see below). With David, speak to the Lord about the circumstances in which you feel shame, and leave them in his hands (see below).

The Praise

Again, David’s prayer temporarily worked, for he again bursts forth in praise.

But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors! Make your face shine on your servant; save me in your steadfast love!

(Psalm 31:14–16)

David felt the object of shame because of what he had done, because of what others had done to him, and because of his circumstances, but he knew that he could “trust” Yahweh.

He admitted that his shame was, in part, due to his own sin and so he cried, “You are my God.” This was an expression of repentance and returning to the Lord.

When we feel the weight of our sin, we often do not, in the moment, feel as if we are one of God’s own. When we bring shame upon ourselves by our own sin, we may not feel as though we can, in trust, cry out, “You are my God.” We may feel as though our sins have separated us from God—that we have no right to any claim of relationship with him. But when David recognised his iniquity, he cried, “You are my God.” He repented of his iniquity and rested in a renewed relationship with his God. We must do the same.

He acknowledged that his shame was, in part, due to his circumstances—due to things with which he was associated. He therefore prayed, “My times are in your hands.” In other words, “There are things that are beyond my control—things that people are trying to use against me to heap shame on me. There may be people and circumstances associated with me that cause me shame. But I leave the uncontrollables in your hands.”

Sometimes, shame is not your fault. There are things that might bring you shame that you have no control over. The shame carried by those who were sexually molested as children is not their fault. You may feel shame because of something or someone with which you are associated that may not be your own fault. As mentioned, Jeffrey Dahmer’s brother felt so shamed by his association with the Dahmer name that he changed his surname. His shame was not his fault, but it was very real nonetheless. When your shame is beyond your control, hand it to the Lord. That may be easier said than done, but it is what must ultimately happen.

He knew that his shame was, in part, due to what others had done to him. So he prayed: “Rescue me from the hand of my enemies and my persecutors!” (v. 15). Ultimately, he prayed that the Lord would shame those who were trying to shame him (v. 17).

When others are seeking to shame you, the natural inclination is to react in kind. Instead, leave it in the Lord's hands and pray for him to deliver you. Pray for him to shame those who oppose him and those who are his.

The Weapon of Courage

Finally, David committed to combatting shame with courage (vv. 17–24). The source of his courage (v. 24) was his understanding of God's character, which is revealed in the praise that flows in vv. 19–24. But first, there is another prayer. The emotional rollercoaster continues. He once again prays (vv. 17–18) before he praises (vv. 19–24).

The Prayer

David's final prayer is recorded in vv. 17–18.

O LORD, let me not be put to shame, for I call upon you; let the wicked be put to shame; let them go silently to Sheol. Let the lying lips be mute, which speak insolently against the righteous in pride and contempt.

(Psalm 31:17–18)

He has already expressed his confidence in the Lord and set forth his complaint; now, he exhorts himself and his readers to face shame and those who would shame him with courage. He prays that God will remove his shame and repay those who would shame him. Again, he does not shame them himself, which may well just have led to a vicious circle of shaming and counter-shaming, but entrusts their shame to the Lord.

By the way, God certainly intends to shame those who oppose him. Daniel stated this clearly: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). David prays for God to do precisely what God says he will do.

The Praise

Having entrusted his shame to the Lord, he concludes with an outburst of praise. And he does so, evidently, even before the enemies against whom he just prayed have been dealt with. They have not yet been shamed, but still he praises. Prayer enabled praise. "Prayer lifts the burden off the soul and gives broader perspectives so that in the midst of trouble the ability to praise God and bless his name is often recaptured" (Leupold).

As we have seen, David has repented of his own iniquity in relation to his shame, and has handed his circumstances to the Lord. He has prayed that the Lord would repay those who seek to shame him further. Now, he ends the psalm with praise.

The praise takes a threefold form. First, he acknowledges God's dealings generally with his people (vv. 19–20). Second, he admits that God has dealt with him personally in that way (vv. 21–22). Third, he appeals to God's people to respond to God appropriately (vv. 23–24).

David's Acknowledgement

The first step in his praise is an acknowledgement of God's general dealings with his people: "Oh, how abundant is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you and worked for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of the children of mankind! In the cover of your presence you hide them from the plots of men; you store them in your shelter from the strife of tongues" (vv. 19–20).

As he brings the psalm to a close, he takes his eyes completely off himself and others who would cause him shame, and sets them squarely on the Lord. It was necessary for him to detail the shame he felt, but now it is as if a weight has been lifted from his shoulders and he is able to praise.

Regardless of what God's enemies would do to God's people, God remains good. He has goodness "stored up" for his people. The term can be translated "hidden." As Leupold says, "God accumulates treasures, His goodness, which He lays up in store for His children against the time when they need it." God stores up his goodness, ready to give it to his people just when they need it most. This is not a promise that those who fear God will only ever experience good (as we define it) from his hand, but a promise that, when they need it the most, God will show them a sign of the goodness that he has stored up for them. And ultimately, when God shames his enemies, he showers those who fear him with good.

When you feel the weight of shame, deliberately reflect on the promise that the Lord has good stored up for those who fear him. This goodness is "stored up" for those who fear God because it is peculiar to them. God is good generally to believers and unbelievers alike, but he has a special type of goodness reserved for those who are his own. Acknowledging this hidden goodness enables you to rise above your feelings of shame and to focus on the good that God has in store for his people.

God not only "stores up" good for his people (v. 19), but he also protects them (v. 20). It may sound strange to speak of God's protection in light of everything he has said about those who oppose him. It hardly seems like God had protected David, but actually he had. God had protected him from the worst of what they intended to do. How much worse it would have been apart from God's protection.

David's Admission

Second, David admits in praise that the Lord had dealt with him in the way that he deals generally with his people. "Blessed be the LORD, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was in a besieged city. I had said in my alarm, 'I am cut off from your sight.' But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy when I cried to you for help" (vv. 21–22). The Lord was good to his people generally, but also to David particularly. "What he had just asserted to be generally true of all believers, he now declares to have been verified in his own experience" (Alexander).

There was a time when David felt surrounded—"besieged"—by enemies. He felt cut off from God's presence. When a city is besieged, those stuck inside are helpless. They cannot send for help beyond the siegeworks. David knew what it was to feel helpless, but he acknowledges that, when besieged, God was able to receive messages on the other side of the siegeworks.

There are times (let's be honest) when it seems like our opposition is too great for the Lord, but it necessary for us to realise that God always hears us. Our circumstances are never beyond God's help. For that, he deserves our praise.

David's Appeal

Finally, in the light of the goodness that God has stored up for his people, and in the light of the goodness that he showered on David, there is only one reasonable response: "Love the LORD, all you his saints! The LORD preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride. Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD!" (vv. 23–24).

Shame tempts us to hide from the Lord—as Adam and Eve hid from the Lord when they were ashamed—but David encourages God's "saints" to instead "love the LORD." When you feel a sense of shame, you have one of two options: cling to the Lord in love, or run from him in shame and fear. Those who are his saints are here called to love him.

The principle can be illustrated in the life of Peter. The Gospels record two events in the life of Peter that bear striking similarities. The first took place near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the second near the end. Both involve a miraculous catch of fish. In both instances, Peter and friends were out fishing all night. In both instances, they caught nothing. In both instances, Jesus arrived in the morning and told the fishermen to cast their nets on the other side. In both instances, a miraculous catch resulted. The difference lies in Peter's response.

In Luke 5, Peter sensed his own sinfulness in light of Jesus' power and cried, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (v. 8). In John 21, following the same miracle, Peter, who had just days before denied even knowing Jesus, dived into the lake and swam to Jesus (v. 7). A little later, when Jesus asked him, "Do you love me?" Peter affirmed, "You know that I love you" (vv. 15–19).

Faced with the option to hide from the Lord or run to the Lord in love, what will you choose?

But those who love Yahweh need to do something else: They need to "be strong" and "take courage," for they will certainly face the opposition of which David has written. The psalm "does not promise an end to trouble; rather the strength to meet it" (Kidner). When faced with shame, those who love the Lord must face it with confidence, complaint and courage.

The Weapon of Calvary

As we bring this study to a close, we should recognise that there is actually one more weapon against shame that is implicit in the text—and it is the most potent of all.

Verse 5 was quoted by Jesus as the last words he spoke on the cross before dying: "Into your hand I commit my spirit" (see Luke 23:46). New Testament scholars frequently remind us that, when a New Testament writer or speaker quotes the Old Testament, he has not only that verse, but the entire surrounding context, in mind. This is a psalm about shame, in which David commits himself to the Lord's hands. That is exactly what the Lord Jesus did on the cross. When he quoted this psalm, he did so as one who felt the weight of shame. As Philip P. Bliss wrote,

Bearing shame and scoffing rude

Shame in the Hands of a Truthful God

Psalm 31:1–24

Stuart Chase

in my place condemned he stood,
sealed my pardon with his blood:
“Hallelujah, what a Saviour!”

If you are overwhelmed with a sense of shame, the best place to look is to the cross of Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus bore all the shame of those whom he died to save. He died a shameful death, but God vindicated him by raising him from the dead. In the same way that Jesus committed himself to his Father, those who will ultimately be delivered from eternal shame must commit themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Will you today admit the very real shame that you have incurred before a holy God on account of your sin? Will you give that shame to Jesus, who bore the shame of sinners in his death on the cross? Will you trust him for forgiveness?

If you will, then you can be one of his saints who are called to love him, and whom he preserves. If you will not, be sure that he abundantly repays those who act in pride. The choice is yours: How will you respond today?

AMEN