

“Reunited and Unashamed”

Isaiah 5:1-10

Dr. Greg Norfleet

Good evening. My name is Greg Norfleet, and I'm so honored and so grateful to be able to serve as your pastor of counseling and the director of the counseling ministry here at Brownwood Presbyterian Church. My wife, Cindy and I just celebrated our fifth month anniversary here. We arrived in mid-October, and it's just been a joy. And we are so grateful for your warm welcome and hospitality. It's fun to just make new friends and I just love how the spirit animates the body of Christ here. You move toward people even as God has moved toward you, so you move toward others. It is spectacular.

Very important themes appear in the early pages of Scripture. So, we need to take much care and pay close attention to these themes because they will gain momentum as the redemptive story unfolds. For example, Genesis 2:25, and the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. Nothing concealed, everything revealed. No need to flee, no need to hide, only the joy of the liberty of the children of God. Genesis 3. Things change. Then the eyes of both were open and they knew that they were naked. So, they began to cover themselves and they began to hide. God speaks. Where are you? And Adam replies, I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I knew I was naked. Now freeze the frame, Capture the moment. Note carefully. This is the very first instance of fear in the Scriptures, and it comes in response to shame. And this problem of shame takes on a life of its own. It gains momentum as the story unfolds, not only in the pages of Scripture. For example, you read through the Psalter. Let me not be put to shame cries the Psalmist.

But this problem also unfolds in the story of our lives. I remember one of my early remembrances of the problem with shame. I was a young boy, probably 12 or 13 years old, and I'm a third baseman. And why the coach put me on the pitching mound, I have no idea why but he did and I could not throw a strike. I was walking batters one by one, loading the bases. I kid you not. I was walking in the runs and everybody could see it. The problem of shame. Now that's a mild example. I fear shame. I suspect you fear shame. Someone you know fears shame. And so my aim this evening is to magnify God and to minister to you by connecting the riches of Christ to the realities of our shame. And in my attempt to do so, I am greatly indebted to one of my professors and mentors, Dr. Ed Welch, and the faculty at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, also a faculty member with the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation. He's written a wonderful book. It's called Shame Interrupted. I highly recommend it to you if you find yourself tripped up and entrapped by the problem of shame.

Now, before we open up the Scriptures, let's get a little bit oriented to the topic at hand in two ways. First of all, let's define shame and let me borrow Dr. Welch's definition. **Shame is a deep sense that you are unacceptable because of something you did, something that was done to you or something that is associated with you.**

Let's distinguish shame from the problem of guilt. Guilt captures our experience in the courtroom. The judge is looking at you because we've broken God's law. We are legally guilty before God. And so we stand in need of his pardon. But shame is a much bigger category. Shame captures our experience in the public square. Everyone is staring at you and turning away from you.

It's the larger category. Guilt says I did something wrong. Shame says I am something wrong. Sometimes I have felt like that Rubik's cube that could never be solved even by God. Have you ever sensed I? Am something wrong? Well, that's the distinction. Let's unpack the Scriptures from Isaiah Chapter 54 and the Prophet Isaiah gives us some of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture. God speaking his truth in love through the Prophet Isaiah.

Sing O barren one who did not bear. Break forth into singing and cry aloud. You, who have not been in labor, for the children of the desolate one, will be more than the children of her who is married, says the Lord. Enlarge the place of your tent and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out. Do not hold back. Lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes, for you will spread abroad to the right and to the left. And your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities. Fear not. For you will not be ashamed. Do not be confounded for you will not be disgraced. For you will forget the shame of your youth and the reproach of your widowhood. You will remember no more. For your maker is your husband. The Lord of Hosts is His name. And the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of all the Earth. He has called for the Lord, has called you like a wife, deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment, I deserted you, but with great compassion. I will gather you in overflowing anger. For a moment, I hid my face from you. But with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord your Redeemer. This is like the days of Noah to me, as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth. So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you. And I will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed but my steadfast love shall not depart from you and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

This is God's Word. Let me pray for us.

Our Father. You have spoken through the Prophet. Even this morning we were reminded that waters will gush forth in the wilderness. And then will the eyes of the blind be open and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lamb leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy. You take away our shame and the unfolding of your word gives light. Would you come? And by the power of your Holy Spirit, work by and with your Word to help us, we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

I want to consider the text in three parts. First of all, verse one -- God sees and God understands your shame. He gives us a metaphor. Secondly, in verses one through five, God speaks into your shame with tender words of hope. And finally, verses six through ten, God comes near and dispels your shame by joining himself to you forever.

Let's consider these in part. First of all, notice in verse one God sees and He understands your shame. God speaks His truth in categories that capture our fallen condition. It's like He gives us a mirror and he invites us to look into the mirror to see ourselves clearly. It's like he says to us, Is this your experience? Is it like this? And when the shoe fits, he invites you and me to personalize, to fill in the details. Notice God sees you and He moves toward you and he invites you to identify with the barren woman. It is a very powerful image. In that day, you imaged God by bearing children. It was a mark of honor. The family name would go forward. And so to be a barren woman was to have a very severe mark of shame because the family name would come to nothing. It was very public. It was very painful. It was very empty. It was very hopeless. In the ancient near East, and for the life of me, I can't find the commentary. I think it's still packed up in one of my boxes. I remember reading that in the ancient Near East, a capital

city was personified as a woman married to her God. Her husband. And when the city was overthrown and its people sent into exile, the city was considered a barren woman, rejected by her husband, God.

Now, what about the specific biblical background? We know from redemptive history that after the exodus from Egypt, Israel was joined to the Lord in a marriage covenant. But Israel proved herself unfaithful. And in Isaiah's day, Judah turned from the Lord to the Babylonians for safety. And they forged an alliance and they broke covenant with the Lord. They, as it were, committed adultery. And consequently, Israel was forsaken and given over to the Babylonian captivity. And so Jerusalem, the great city, was overthrown. Her people were deported. The city was a barren woman, an image of shame and hopelessness. Imagine this woman's horror and humiliation. The voices inside of you whisper forsaken and the circumstances all around you shout hopeless. Everything inside of you and everything outside of you is shouting shameful. Are you beginning to identify a little bit with this barren woman? Does it does it capture something of your fallen condition?

Maybe not. So maybe more categories will help. Dr. Welch. As he wisely notes, Scripture provides a few more images that capture our experience of shame. There's the category of the naked, a sense of being seen, of being exposed. There's the category of the outcast, the rejected one, the unacceptable. I don't belong, but everybody else does. There's the category of the unclean, the sense of contamination. I am dirty. But why is this? Why this experience? Remember our working definition? Perhaps it's shame because of something you did or something you still do. Perhaps you find yourself tripped up and trapped in an addiction, an attraction, something scandalous in the past, something struggling in the present. Or perhaps the shame is because of something done to you. A violation, an unfaithful spouse, a name that you were once called and you still remember it 40 years later. Used, misused, abused like an object, rejected or neglected. Maybe you were unloved by an important person, but someone close to you was favored. Maybe there's something about you. A difference that is very noticeable. Maybe it's a physical difference. Maybe it's a financial difference. Maybe it's an intellectual difference. Something stands out. Or perhaps it's shame because of something associated with you. A secret in the family. An event in the past, a public failure.

Can you identify with shame?

If you can identify with shame, good news. Because God has a special interest in people tripped up and trapped in shame. You are exactly the kind of person that he sets his heart upon and he moves toward you. And if he sees and understands your struggle, you can bet he's going to move heaven and earth to do something about it. That's our first point. God sees and God understands your shame.

But secondly, notice how these first five verses continue to unfold. God speaks into your shame with tender words of hope. Now, when the Bible counts to three, something really big is about to unfold. And in this passage, not once, not twice, but three times, God issues a call to you. And each time He gives his grounds for doing so. Each time he grounds his call in a promise. Call number one. Sing for joy. Break forth into singing and cry aloud. Why? The text tells us because the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married, says the Lord. The promise of a supernatural birth from above. Children of promise supernaturally -- remember Sarah? Barren. But God speaks a word of promise. Is anything too difficult for the Lord? And she gives birth. And she sings for joy. Sing for joy. Call number one. Call number two. Enlarge your tent. Stretch out the curtains. Make more room. Don't hold back. Lengthen your cords. Strengthen your stakes first two. Why? Because you're going to spread out abroad to the right and to the left in your offspring will possess and people the nations and cities. It's the

promise of supernatural growth of God's people. They will inherit the earth and the gates of hell can do nothing to stop them.

Call number three so tenderly. Do not be afraid. Why? Because you will not be ashamed. You will not be disgraced. Do you hear the language of promise? You will forget the shame of your youth. You will remember the reproach of your widowhood no more. It's the promise of supernatural confidence in God's people. You will face the future with a supernatural fearlessness. And notice for all of these good reasons. Sing for joy. Spread your tent. Fear no more.

There is an even deeper reason beneath all of these reasons. There is a person who will give himself to you. Your maker is your husband. The Lord of Hosts is his name. The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of all the Earth He is called. Do you see? The Bible works not only like a mirror holding it up to help you see yourself clearly. The Bible also works like a magnificent portrait in God holding forth this beautiful picture. This is the person who will give himself to you.

Multiple titles converge to underline two important truths. On the one hand, Maker, Lord of Hosts, God of all the Earth, these titles highlight the strength of his arm. The God who gives himself to you is the mighty one. No foe can prevail against his indomitable strength. But on the other hand, Husband, Holy one, Redeemer. These titles highlight the strength of God's heart. The God who gives Himself to you is the merciful. No shame is too great for His invincible love. But here's the big idea. And we don't want to miss this. This person, this mighty and merciful person is your husband.

Now, why does that matter? Because a person is identified by their connections, their associations. To be connected to sin brings contamination and shame. But to be connected to God and to be associated with him brings purification and honor. Think of it this way. In the Book of Leviticus. When's the last time you read through the book of Leviticus? Still early in the year. Maybe you're spending some time in there these days in the Book of Leviticus. God gives us a few more categories. There's the category of the clean all as well. There's the category of the unclean. All is not well. Something I've done or something done to me makes me unclean. And how does the unclean become clean? The clean doesn't have the power to make clean the unclean. When the clean comes into contact with the unclean, the unclean always contaminates the clean. But there's a third category. The good news. The Holy, the Holy and only the Holy can purify the unclean. Recall Isaiah the Prophet-- Chapter six. He sees the Lord seated on his throne. He hears the angelic creatures calling out Holy, holy, Holy is the Lord God the Almighty. And then He responds, Woe is me. I am ruined, for I am a man with unclean lips, and I live among the people with unclean lips. And then one of the serifs flew to me, Isaiah says, with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And with it he touched my mouth and said, see, this has touched your lips.

And only the Holy can make clean the unclean.

Do you remember the scene from the Return of the King? Faramir is slipping away, and Earth is weeping and, says that there were kings in Gondor, as there were once upon a time, they say, for it is said in old war, the hands of the king are the hands of a healer.

Do you see what Isaiah, the Prophet, is proclaiming? There really is a king. He's the holy one. And the Holy one has returned to be your husband. He finds himself to you. He comes near to you, and he touches you. This new bond breaks the old bond. This Holy Spirit purifies the unclean. No other religion

on earth can say this. No other help in town can do this. Only Christianity. Because it's all about your associations. It's all about who you're connected to. It's all about the Holy one who is your husband? How can this be?

Let's consider lastly verses six through ten. God comes near. He sees and understands your shame. He speaks into your shame with tender words of hope. And then finally he comes near. And he dispels your shame by joining himself to you forever. For the Lord has called you like a wife, deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment, I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you in overflowing anger For a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love. I will have compassion on you, says the Lord your Redeemer. Wonder of wonders. The husband who was rejected is the husband who is resolved to renew his marriage covenant. He is the God who will bring you back. How can this be?

In the second half of the Book of Isaiah, the person and work of a servant comes into view, especially chapter 53 the chapter preceding this one and still ringing in my ears are those rich sermons preached during our global ministry conference by Dr. Neil Stewart, where we lingered there in Chapter 53, and the one will represent the many the servant will take upon himself. Our Shame. Chapter 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And as one from whom men hide their faces. He was despised and we esteemed him not notice for seven. For a brief moment, I deserted you in overflowing anger. For a moment I hid my face from you. Verse eight. When did God reject and forsake his people bride? Well, in one sense, we know when judgment fell on Jerusalem and the people were carried off to Babylon. But that rejection was only a preview of things to come. God's ultimate rejection came on Friday when he crushed his servant on the cross. On Friday, Jesus was condemned as if he were the guilty one. He's the man for others. On Friday, Jesus was lost and forsaken by the Father. Rejected. On Friday, Jesus came under the dominion of sin. On Friday, the body of Jesus was sewn into the ground in weakness and in this honor. But the one will represent the many. He's the man for others. And so there you are. United, too, represented by Jesus in his death.

But wait. There's the promise. It still stands, Isaiah says, the Lord will call you back four, seven and eight with great compassion. I will gather you with everlasting love. I will have compassion on you. When did God welcome home and restore his people bride?

Well, in one sense, the movement began when a faithful remnant returned from exile and back to Jerusalem. But it was incomplete. And it was really only a preview, a foretaste of things to come. Because God's ultimate welcome came on Sunday when God raised his servant from the dead. On Friday, he was delivered over to death as if he were the guilty one. But on Sunday, he was raised to life and vindicated as the righteous one. On Friday, he was lost and forsaken. But on Sunday, he's welcomed home by the father and embraced -- this son of mine, who was once lost, has now been found. On Friday, he came under the dominion of sins power. But on Sunday, he came out from underneath that dominion and began to walk into the land of the living.

On Friday, his body was sewn into the ground in weakness and shame. But on Sunday, his body was raised with glory and power. And there you were. Because the one will represent the many. There you are on that happy day, represented by Jesus in his resurrection. Accept it. Do you see -- the result of the servants work as the New Covenant, the restored Marriage Covenant, the Holy One is your husband, who breaks the old bond of shame and forms a new bond of honor.

But it gets even better.

How strong is this new bond? How long is this marriage covenant? Listen to the Lord, your husband. Verse nine. This is like the days of Noah to me, as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth. Remember the promise. Remember the rainbow that God gave as a sign pointing to His promise. I remember my Old Testament professor, Dr. Richard Pratt. He blew my mind when he told me it was the Warriors Bow. Remember the direction in which the bow was aimed not downward toward the earth, but upward toward the heavens. As if to say, If I must once again bring judgment, then I will bend my bow and fire my arrow. Not at you, but at my servant. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. And with his wounds, we are healed.

So the servants work is finished and God's wrath has been quenched in the death of Jesus. Notice what he says verses nine and ten. So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you for the mountains may depart and the hills be removed. The most solid, the most dependable, the strongest things that you can imagine. The mountains may depart and the hills be removed. But my steadfast love shall not depart from you. And my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord who has compassion on you.

Are you feeling a little bit like the turtle? Just reluctant to come out of the shell? God says he understands, and so he just keeps piling his promises on top. One after another. Not war, but peace forever. Not anger but love forever. The Lord, the merciful and gracious God and unswerving, never ending marriage covenant. And it's all about your associations. The one and only union that can dispel your shame and instill true honor.

Well, let me bring this to a close. We've considered what God has been saying, but what is God doing with what He is saying? He's showing us this evening what to do with our shame. A few years ago, a gentleman that I was meeting with and counseling. He bought me an old fashioned scale, had the balance beam and a little basket hanging from the left and a little basket hanging from the right. And just a few weeks before, we talked about heavy things, weighty things, including his shame. But we considered God's promises and how weighty and far more glorious they are. You know, glory literally means weighty. God's words, His promises have weight -- shame weighs a lot. It is a very persistent problem that is very resistant to a cure. And so what did we do that day? And tonight, what is this passage calling you to do?

As my professor and mentor, Dr. Ed Welch wonderfully put it, we don't ignore our shame and get on with our day. We're not stoics who stuff our pain, nor do we exalt our shame and give it final say. Instead, what we do is we out weigh it with God's promises because His promises in Christ have more glory, more weight, and it tips the scales. What does it look like when the riches of Christ outweigh the realities of your shame? What does it sound like when you are reunited to God through Christ and are unashamed? It sounds a little bit like this. Psalm 34.

My soul makes its boast in the Lord. Let the humble hear and be glad. magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord and He answered me and He delivered me from all of my fears. Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces will never be ashamed.

Let me pray for us.

Our father. You tell us through the Apostle Paul to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. And next Sunday we will begin Holy Week, reflecting upon your death for us and your coming resurrection. And we pray that this word, this truth spoken in love through Isaiah the Prophet would be like that teabag that begins to steep, never in a hurry, but until that hot water comes under the influence, would you so work. Would you use these beautiful words to outweigh our shame. And this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.