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*Papa's* **LOVE**

*& frightful*  
**WARNINGS**

Brad Jersak

**Papa's Love & Frightful Warnings | Brad Jersak 2**

**Can We Talk? | Ed Dunn 5**

**"Shame On You!" Really? | Rachel Ramer 6**

**The Bride of Christ | Greg Albrecht 7**



# *Papa's* LOVE & *frightful* WARNINGS

Brad Jersak

*“Bradley, don’t touch. You’ll burn your little hanny [hand] right off.”*

—Irene Jersak

*The Lord God commanded the man,  
“...you must not eat from the tree of the  
knowledge of good and evil,  
for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”*

—Genesis 2:16

*“If your right hand causes you  
to stumble, cut it off.”*

—Jesus Christ

## **“HOT!” – MOM’S WARNING**

I was perhaps 6-years-old. Maybe at Uncle Henry and Auntie Florence’s house. I remember fixating on Auntie’s red-hot stove element. I recall my mother’s dire warning. *“Bradley, don’t touch. You’ll burn your little hanny [hand] right off.”*

I know these memories are vivid visual reconstructions of early childhood emotions rather than video footage of exact events. I know, for example, that the oven was never where I see it in my head. And it’s very likely that Irene Jersak, my beloved mother, said nothing of the sort. But while the facts may fail to find their way through the haze of five decades, the truth is a clear-flowing stream. Here is the truth:

- I knew beyond any doubt that my mom loved me and that I loved her.

- I knew what her warning meant. I knew she meant touching the stove would burn me—and NOT that if I touched the stove, she would burn me.

- Even as a young literalist, I knew that the stove would burn my hand—and NOT that it would burn my hand right off. I was able to intuit the hyperbole.

It is therefore surprising to me how often adults who read Scripture stumble into these common errors:

- We have often imagined that when we disobey a divine warning, God becomes the threat and the source of harm, rather than our own disobedience. We confuse the wages of sin (intrinsic consequences) with the wrath (violent anger) of God.

- Similarly, we have often mistaken God’s dire warnings as personal threats of divine violence for disobeying him rather than the loving care of our divine Parent who only seeks to dissuade us from choices by which we harm ourselves.

- And then, we habitually literalized hyperbole of temporal self-destruction into divinely-sanctioned universal, permanent and even eternal catastrophes. For example, we’ve equated passages announcing the fiery destruction of Jerusalem (which happened repeatedly) with the end of history, the scorching of the universe and the beginning of eternal conscious torment.

How [the hell] did we ever get from “Don’t burn

yourself today!" to "I'll burn you forever!?"

I'd like to blame the hellfire revivalists, men like Jonathan Edwards, who likened listeners to "insects roasting over an open fire" but honestly, these horrid inferences emerged much earlier in the human drama.

## **"WHERE ARE YOU?" – HIDING FROM MOM**

- *God: "Where are you?"*  
*Adam: "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*  
—Genesis 3:9-10
- *Eden [my wife], calling our son [age four-ish]: "Dominic!"*  
*Dominic: "Nothing!"*

Back to my memory. Later that day, I committed both a mistake and a sin.

My mistake was in assuming the stove would only burn me when the stove was set to "On" and only while the element was red. My sin was that I presumed to touch it at all after Mom had said "Don't." When I ventured the forbidden touch, it was my first experience with a burn. I had no previous experience with how deep a burn could go, or and that it wouldn't stop burning when I stop touching. This was a new reality to me—I was shocked and terrified.

In addition to the pain, I must have also experienced guilt and shame because my first instinct was *NOT* to cry out or to run to my mother. Instead, I forced myself into silence and ran off to hide. Why would I do that? Had Mom ever given me the impression that when I was

suffering, she was someone I needed to hide from—someone who would harm me further?

And yet we see how this was exactly how Adam and Eve act after eating from the wrong tree. They had ever only known God as the Friend who provided them with Paradise and walked with them as an intimate Companion in the garden.

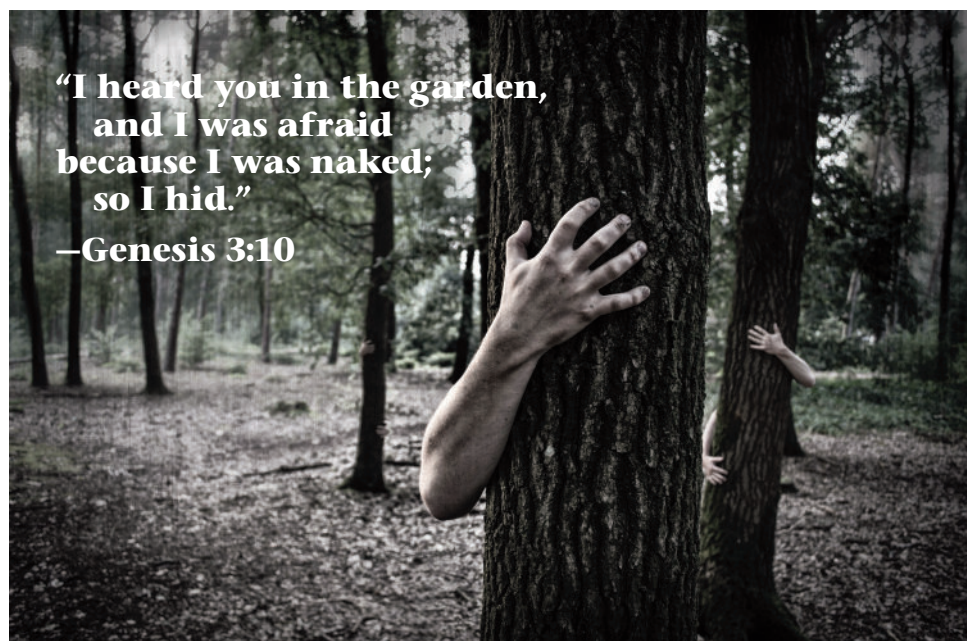
Yet, when they grasped for autonomy and ate the poison of knowledge through self-will, what happened? Their eyes were opened, saw they were naked and felt shame. And from that shame emerged a false image of God. No longer their loving Father, YHWH now assumed the character of someone to fear, to hide from and, no doubt, the source of death.

Had God ever done anything

tainted by their shame and the dust of death (i.e. their *fear*). In their deluded minds, alienated by self-deception, God was now the death-dealer.

## **"WHILE STILL A LONG WAY OFF..." – THE ABBA (PAPA) JESUS REVEALED**

Finally, I came to my senses and ran to my mother. She scooped me up into her arms and quickly took me to the kitchen sink, where she ran cool water over my fingers for a long time. It felt SO good. She then carefully applied a wonderful healing balm that may have come via Auntie Florence's new discovery of a miracle cure—freshly cut Aloe Vera. Then came swathing bandages of clean, bright white gauze and, happily, cuddles from my auntie and



that even remotely warranted such a blasphemous inference? Not at all. They fabricated their new conception and hideous projection of divine punisher from God's loving warning

consolation (not shaming or rebuke) from my mom.

When the prodigal son finally ventured home after being burnt on his own self-centeredness, he did not find what he expected.

He did not need to plead for pity or a servant's quarters. He had disowned his father, but his father never disowned him. He discovered the joy of his father's arms who ran to him while he was still a long way off.

This is the truth of *Abba* that Jesus came to show us. The God we imagined in our guilt and shame was a slanderous misrepresentation, an idol constructed of human fear. The son not only recovered his place in his father's house—his broken image of Dad was also repaired and he was reconciled to his father's welcoming arms. No need to run, no need to hide, no need to fear.

water, aloe gel, clean gauze and a warm embrace ready to give.

## EPILOGUE

Does it offend us that Jesus issued frightening warnings about the consequences of our rebellion? When we are rushing into destruction, is it enough that he said, "Woe to you! This insanity will be the death of you!"? Do we always have to repeat the error of inferring that parental warnings make him an angry and punitive ogre?

Or do you think he should have said, "Look, it's really no big deal. In the end, you'll find your way back home, I'll forgive your sins and heal your wounds, and

• The warnings are not threats that God will harm you. In love, his dramatic and hyperbolic warnings are not a measure of how angry he will be, but of how dangerous our defiance can be to ourselves and to others.

• The warnings that end in judgment are stern because the judgment intrinsic to our sin can be truly terrible. But even if that's how the warning ends, that's not how the story ends. "Mercy triumphs over judgement." It's just that God's heart for us is not judgement at all. He'd rather we heed the warnings and experience fullness of life now. □

*Brad Jersak serves as art director and editor for CWR magazine.*



*But while he was still a long way off...*

Human compassion for little Adam, little Eve and little Bradley says, "Don't hide from Mom! Run to her as quickly as you can!" And while Jesus' first listeners were scandalized by Jesus' forgiving Father, we know enough to say, "Don't hide from Papa! Run to him as quickly as you can!" And then, even in the first impulse to head home, we find God is already running to us—living

all will be well." Well, he often does hint at exactly that (as in the parable) ... but I will leave you with these principles of interpreting divine warnings:

• The One issuing them is your loving heavenly Father, whose agenda is your protection and restoration. He's not a retributive tyrant king. He's your loving *Abba*.

**"Those who look to [the Lord] are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame."**

**—Psalm 34:5**

# Can We Talk?

Ed Dunn

Life “sheltering in place” these days has had its share of challenges for all of us. For several academic quarters now, I’ve shared my home, again, with my twenty-year-old daughter, Lauren. I say “again” because, as a “Third-Year” at a California university, Lauren has been home from school and back with me taking classes online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Let’s just say we’ve had plenty of time and opportunity to talk.

As a father and daughter, we have talked about the recent events we as a nation, and the world, really, have experienced together on the critical topics of race relations, fairness and justice. You could say we’ve had our conversational plates full. To witness all we have through the media, whether social media or the more traditional media of television and print, we cannot deny we’ve been presented with so much to think about. And, so much to talk about.

In all this talking, it has become clear we do see some things quite differently. We also see some things exactly the same. Whether our views have been inspired by youthful passion, energy and a deep desire for constructive change, or by years of life lived and a sincere hope for a measured hand in bringing such change about, we have come to appreciate one another’s point of view.

The conversational process has not been easy. Lauren relies more on social media for the news and conversations she values. I rely more on the traditional media, but do so with what I believe is a healthy skepticism of it all. Lauren believes that constructive change should come quickly, whereas I believe change should take time. Neither of us is completely right and neither of us is completely wrong. Lauren can tend to simplify issues and I can tend to over-complicate them. At times, a great deal of patience, on both of our parts, has been required to talk it all through.

Rumi, a 13th-century Persian poet and well-known teacher of his day, was famous for saying, “Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing

there is a field. I’ll meet you there.” I love this wisdom. I value it because, although we can see the big issues of our times very differently, and often from the point of view of “right” and “wrong,” it is our ability to talk to each other from a place of love that can serve us best.

Jesus himself liked to ask questions around the most pressing “hot button” issues of his day: “How do you see it?” or “How do you read it?” exemplifies how Jesus invited conversation with his listeners around key aspects of the Law (Luke 10:26). “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” served as a critical question around the tension of his identity (Matthew 16:13). He posed these questions in order to create the opportunity to discuss two of the most important topics of his day.

The truth is, in talking, we may not always come to a point of agreement. The intensity of the emotions we can experience may lead us to feel miles apart. The Apostle James offers some helpful advice which has stood the test of time between the stresses of his day and those of our own: “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). Although this advice is not always easy to follow, it can help us through the challenges when we just can’t seem to hear one another.

And that’s what I’ve come to see with all the recent conversations with my daughter, Lauren. A better question than, “Can We Talk?” has become, “Can We Listen?” Can we really listen to each other, consider and repeat back what the other is saying? Even if we can, we still may not always agree. We certainly haven’t with all the pressing issues in front of us every day. But, having the time and opportunity together to talk, and to listen, has been nothing short of a gift. □

*Ed Dunn serves at PTM as editor, staff writer and host of the This Month at PTM (on the CWRblog).*

# “Shame On You!” Really?

Rachel Ramer



Shame can hijack the life of an unwed mother, outrank a church’s universal stance on the value of life, and contribute to the demise of children left unprotected to disease and malnutrition. All this happened at the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, Ireland between the years 1925 and 1961.

The remains of nearly 800 children, found in neglected, underground sewage chambers connected to the home for unwed mothers in Tuam, provide heartbreaking evidence of a religious heritage turned hazardous. This shelter, managed by the Bon Secours Sisters, was a place where children suffered in difficult conditions due to societal neglect. Many died of illness or from being underfed while waiting for adoption. This home was one of several throughout Ireland, monuments not for love and protection of life, but shrines of shame.

## **Distinguishing Shame from Guilt**

Religion conflates guilt and shame. Guilt indicates

culpability, violations of moral behavior, and responsibility. Shame sends a different message—a social punishment, a rejection, a humiliation. A child may feel shame, for example, because of the deeds of a parent. At the height of Roman power, one noteworthy aspect of crucifixion was public shaming. Jesus experienced that shame, but that did not make him guilty.

Psychologist Mary Lamia states, “Shame is often confused with guilt—an emotion we might experience as a result of a wrongdoing about which we might feel remorseful and wish to make amends.” She adds, “Shame does not make a distinction between an action and the self.”

Psychologist Krystine Batcho adds, “For people who care about how others view them, shame can deter behavior that incurred such sanction. A form of punishment, shame is an aversive emotion that most people will try to avoid.”

## **Shame as a Religious Motivator**

In a religious worldview, shame is often considered an effective way to bring about positive change in people. In *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Bradford A. Mullen states, “Shame is a godly motivator. A virtuous life shames the ungodly, providing a context for evangelism (Titus 2:8, 1 Peter 3:16).” Shame does have that effect, but we pay a price—girls with broken lives, babies with broken bodies, and even in some cases a preference for abortion over facing public shame.

According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III, ancient civilizations were “honor and shame cultures. At the top of the value hierarchy in an ancient culture was not the dyadic pair of ‘truth and falsity’ or ‘life and death,’ but rather ‘honor and shame.’ The chief end of life was to obtain honor and avoid shame.” This, however, was not the main concern of early Christians, who embraced the shame of following Jesus.



## GREG ALBRECHT

# PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

**QUESTION:** Can you tell me how exactly “the church” is the “Bride of Christ”? What does this description teach us?

**RESPONSE:** Yes, the church is the bride of Christ—but the bride of Christ is not the only descriptive metaphor that the Bible uses to describe Christ-followers who compose, by the grace of God, the church.

We must also define the word “church” as we consider your question. The “church” (Greek *ecclesia*) is, according to the New Testament, an “assembly” – it is a plurality of entities, many individuals, a gathering, a group, a meeting or a crowd. When Jesus spoke of “the church” he said, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). So, the assembly or gathering of the *ecclesia* can be small or large.

The word *ecclesia* is not reserved, as used in the Greek language, only for a specifically spiritual definition—an *ecclesia* can take place for any reason, as we see when *ecclesia* describes a riot in the city of Ephesus (see Acts 18). In ancient Greece cities actually had a place called an *agora* where an *ecclesia* (meeting or assembly) could take place.

The “church” as the **bride of Christ** is an assembly of people who are spiritually “in Christ” and in whom Christ himself lives. They are Christ-followers.

Now, the church is also spoken of in the Bible as the **body of Christ**—he is the head of the spiritual body, and those who trust, believe and follow are all a part of that body, as he calls and places his followers within his body. If we insist on only thinking of the church as the **bride of Christ**, then we must struggle with the fact that the church is also the **body of Christ**. Obviously, he would not literally marry his own body—so there are different descriptive metaphors being used to describe the church.

Another oft used metaphor of the church in the New Testament is of a building—Paul says that Christ-followers are “**the temple of the living God**” (1 Corinthians 6:16). Once again, if we are only thinking that the church is the **bride of Christ** then we must also realize that he will also marry not only **his own body** but he will construct a **building**.

Paul Minear in his book, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, catalogued 96 images of the church used in the New Testament, including a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9), the circumcision (Romans 2:25-29, Philippians 3:5-11 and Colossians 2:11-12), ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:18-21), citizens (Galatians 6:10 and Ephesians 2:10), exiles (Hebrews 11:13), an olive tree (Romans 11:13-23), a fig tree (Mark 11:12-14), a vineyard (Matthew 21:28-41) and the table of the Lord (1 Corinthians 10:21). There many other metaphors of the church used in the New Testament—light, salt, the new creation, a flock, a priesthood, the sanctified, the children of God and the friends of Jesus. □

What about Scripture passages where shame appears to be used as motivation? Could it be these are not cues to utilize shame; rather, they reflect a culture where shame was prevalent?

### Jesus, the Shame Disruptor

Christians have adopted the use of shame yet this focus is contrary to the example of Christ. In the story of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus did not condemn the woman, but told her to change her

behavior. (John 8:1-11) He addressed her guilt, but he also disrupted her legacy of humiliation. The far-reaching potency of shame can be difficult to imagine—until, as in Tuam, actual graves are uncovered. Imagine the transformation if the young women and children had encountered a disruption to their humiliation. Imagine if Christians were known for love, not for encouraging shame. □

*Rachel Ramer is the author of Religious Angst. This article is an excerpt adapted from her book.*

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