



BACK TO GOD'S HONORABLE VILLAGE: The Gospel for a Central Asian Culture

Foreword

Communicating the truth of the gospel in relevant and impacting ways is a missiological challenge in every context, particularly when sharing among unbelieving peoples whose core cultural values are honor and shame.

After several years in Central Asia, our team formulated the following evangelistic presentation that interprets the gospel through the lenses of honor and shame. The story has been contextualized for a Central Asia audience through its narrative format, telling of the entire biblical story, incorporation of local symbols, reformulations of Christian theology, and analysis of the cultural dynamics of honor and shame.

For the readership's sake, contextual illustrations are italicized, sections are titled, and key scripture references are included. Oral narration of the story takes about fifteen minutes, and is often enhanced if the evangelist visually sketches the story's key elements on plain paper as it unfolds. Also worth noting, the story presupposes an anthropological model in which the primary sources of honor are purity from defilement and faithfulness to group expectations, and group inclusion/acceptance is the primary result of honor.

The honorable God creates humans with honor (Gen 1-2)

In the beginning was God. He is honorable, prestigious, and glorious – *like a white-bearded, old man living in a grand yurt. There was not a single wrinkle on his suit or a single speck of dust on him*; he is perfectly clean. He is also perfectly faithful to do everything he promised. God is *like the rich uncle who everyone wishes they had*: benefacting, authoritative, honorable, respected, and always faithful to help his family.

One day God decided to create the entire world by just speaking; he created *the Tien Shan Mountains, the warm sun, and rivers of fresh water*. Then God created Adam and Eve. Although they came from dirt, God wanted to give humanity great honor and prestige, so he said to Adam and Eve, "I will give you my authority and honorable family name to rule over my creation as dignified co-regents." They were God's children living in God's great *yurt*, crowned with honor and glory (Ps 8:4-6). In fact, they had so much honor, that they walked around naked and were not even ashamed of it.

Adam and Eve lose their honor (Gen 3)

God instructed Adam and Eve, "You have complete freedom to eat of any tree, but that one. I expect you to honor me as my children by keeping my commands."

But Satan appeared to Adam and Eve, speaking lies. "Surely God is not worthy of all honor, you deserve more for yourself. If only you eat from that tree, you could become like God and rival his great status."

So they walked towards the tree, grabbed the fruit, then as soon as their teeth touched the fruit, their honor flew away. For the first time they felt shame and disgrace. God appeared

and scolded them, "I gave you a position of honor over everything, but you did not act respectfully. You once ruled the earth, but now you will become a slave to the earth. You came from dirt and now you will return to dirt. You were given life, but now you will die."

But most shameful of all were God's next words. "Get out of my here right now!! Since you have brought great shame upon me and yourself as disobedient children, you must go and die on the other side of the river." So Adam and Eve put their heads down and left God's *village*. You see, God has to protect his own honor by avoiding anything shameful. Just like *parents exclude a beggar son or prostitute daughter, or people keep the outhouse and animals separate from house*, so too God removes any source of shame from his presence.

As he was leaving, Adam moaned, "I had everything, but now I have nothing but shame. I have lost my right to God's house, honor, glory, familial identity, name, or authority. I am just a human now, I don't have anything."

We inherit shame and add more

So Adam and Eve settled into their new home and started a new life. They had children, who had children, who had children, who had us! Do you know what it means that we are descendants of Adam and Eve? Imagine what other people think about you if *your mom was a prostitute or grandfather defected during war*. So too, we inherited the shame of our first parents Adam and Eve (Gen 4; Rom 5:12-20), being born on the shameful side of the river *among the pigs, dirt, and toilets* (Eph 2:11-19).

Moreover, our hearts are completely defiled and mired in our own shame. We humans are not just dirty; we are actually made of dirt and will return to the dirt. We are so dirty that we make other things dirty, *like a prostitute defiles anything associated with her: money, children, food, etc.* (Ez 36:17). Before God, we humans are that unclean. Even our good actions and the ground we walk on are defiled because of us (Is 64:6). We are not defiled through association with external things *like alcohol or trash*, but by our own hearts (Mk 7:14-23). Do you know how humans *always clean our shoes, sweep our home or street, and never put bags on the ground* in order to maintain dignity and honor as humans? Likewise, God *wipes us away like dust on his shoes* to maintain his own dignity and prestige (Is 59:2).

Also, we ourselves are unfaithful to God. What happens to someone who is not faithful to observe their culture traditions or meet their family expectations? *For example, they fail to welcome guests, marry the correct person, or respect elders*. The family excludes them in order to save face and preserve honor, right? God has given us only two commands: love God and love other people (Mt 22:37-40). Since we do not keep these commands, we are like disobedient children who dishonor our father and must be rejected from the family.

Before God, we ourselves are very shameful and disgraceful. Born with great shame before God, we added even more shame upon our heads. In God's eyes, we are more shameful than a *crazy, barren, demon-possessed, naked, homeless person*. For this reason, we can't be a part of God's family and all people live on this side of the river.

False honor through culture

So all of Adam's children were dejected by their great shame and desperate to restore their honor. Then one day someone had an idea, "Let's create our own honor! We don't need God's honor! (Gen 11:4) Let's create rules and traditions for everyone on this side of the river to keep, and those who keep them can be reckoned honorable."

Everyone happily agreed to create a new system of honor, but not everyone could agree on the same rules and traditions. So Adam's descendants broke into several groups, each with their own cultural system to cover shame and grant honor. For example, one group said you had to



be a *Muslim, wear black clothes, and drive a Mercedes*; but others determined you have to *wear orange robes and live in poverty*. Every group eventually formulated their own complex system for acquiring and maintaining honor.

But after some time, people became quite displeased with the system. One man in particular voiced his complaint, "This is not working for us. There are many problems with the system that we created. First, there are still many people who are considered shameful and still rejected. Second, such a system makes me feel so much pressure about what other people think about me. I am always afraid that they will not accept me because I don't do everything right. Third, no matter what kind of culture we create, we are still on this shameful side of the river. To be truly honorable, we must cross over to God's side."

False honor through religion

Everybody listened to him, but not everyone agreed. Some people ignored him and continued to use the cultural system to accumulate as much honor as possible. But other people liked his idea and said, "What can we do to make ourselves honorable before our Creator?" Then everyone started to talk all at once.

"Let's go the river and pray for God to accept us back."

"Yeah, we should do that *several times a day*."

"Yeah, *and before each time, we should wash our hands and feet so that we are clean*, then God will probably accept us back into his family."

"Also, everyone must *go to a really distant land and do religious rituals there*."

"We also need *special clothes, like little white hats and long white robes*, so that God and everyone else know how committed we are to keeping all these religious rules and traditions."

The people went on and on until they had hundreds of new religious rules for being clean and faithful before God.

God exalts Abraham's descendants

But from the other side of the family, God pitied their vain attempts to restore honor. "These poor people! They are working so hard to observe their culture and religion to accumulate honor, but nothing is changing. They can't reestablish their honor by themselves; it depends on me (Ps 62:7). They try in vain by washing their hands, but only I can wash their hearts! (Ez 36:24-27)"

God initiated a plan to restore humanity's honor. He picked a man named Abraham, made a covenant with him, and formed a great nation from his descendants (Dt 7:6; Lev 26:13). God gave them a new set of regulations to observe – called Torah. It showed people that they are shameful, but can be clean and faithful to God when they follow God's expectations (Ex 30:17-21).

But, Abraham's descendents became ethnocentric and excluded other groups from finding out about God's plan to restore honor on the earth. When prophets came to remind them that God's honor was intended for all people, they were ignored and even killed. Because their disloyalty and impurity over hundreds of years brought great shame upon God's name before other nations, Abraham's descendants lost their honorable status before God and others in exile (Lam 2:2c; 3:45; 5:1).

Jesus' life of restoring honor

Since Abraham's descendants failed to mediate divine honor to all people, God himself became a human in order to cross over into the shameful *village* for their salvation; and this human was called Jesus. Though human, Jesus did not bear Adam's shame like you and me.



Coming straight from heaven, he was like clean rain from the sky, not dirt from the earth. As God who eternally existed with complete honor (Jn 17:5), descending to the shameful *village* was a great sacrifice of status for him (Phil 2:6-7; 2 Cor 8:9), *like a big politician leaving his prestigious house to live in a trash dump*. Jesus left his honorable position so that humans might cross back from shame to honor.

Jesus' life was amazing. He loved and accepted all people, regardless of how others defined them. Because Jesus honorably accepted everyone, people with great shame came from far away to be restored: the deaf, blind, demon-possessed, lame, bleeding women, prostitutes, adulterers, lepers, and even other nationalities. Jesus was so full of divine honor, anyone became clean and honorable the instance Jesus touched them (Mark 5); he was undefilable.

In his teaching, Jesus told stories of how the shamed would be honored in the final day. "One day, God the Father is going to have a big feast on that side of the river in his own house, but only invite the shamed and rejected" (Mt 8:10-12). He ignored the established cultural systems and spoke about a new code of honor from God available to anyone who followed him (Mt 5-6). But not everyone liked Jesus.

Jesus' shameful death and resurrection to honor

The powerful complained, "Who is this person who ignores all of our traditions and rules? He honors the shameful and accepts the unacceptable. We must punish him for perverting our ancestral traditions and associating with such people." So Jesus was then arrested, stripped naked, mocked, whipped, beaten, spat upon, nailed, then hung upon a cross (Mt 27:28-31).

Could you imagine, the only perfectly honorable person being put to such shame! But why? The answer is simple: the shame Jesus bore was not his own, but ours, just as God promised (Is 53:3). He experienced the pain, humiliation, rejection, and punishment of our shame, so we would not have to ourselves. When Jesus died, all of our filth and dishonor was killed with him; our encroachments upon God's honor were satisfied. Those who follow after Jesus will never be shamed again because Jesus took all of our shame (Rom 10:11-12; 1Ptr 2:6-7a). *You know how if you use a rag to remove the dirt from your shoes, the rag becomes dirty. Well Jesus was like a big white towel that wiped clean everyone's dirt and shame.* Jesus' death cleaned all our evil, impurity, unfaithfulness, and shame from this side of the river (Heb 12:2; 13:12-13).

But even more incredible, Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. He was raised from the ultimate shame of death, given a perfectly new body with no weaknesses, crossed back to God's *village*, received a name above all other names, and now sits in the seat of highest honor (Is 52:13; Eph 1:20-22; Phil 2:9-11; Heb 2:9). Jesus resurrection from the dead built a new bridge from death to life, from shame to honor, from earth to heaven. Finally, people could access what they always wanted – true and eternal honor from God.

Humanity's responses to Jesus

But even after a new bridge was built to the other side of the river, some people did not want to go. Everyone had their own reasons. The religious people said, "We must continue to observe our own religious rituals and traditions. God will only reckon us worthy when we properly observe our culture."

Abraham's descendants were particularly upset. "It is impossible to be faithful to God and become honorable apart from the Law. If we don't separate ourselves from other groups by observing Torah, we will never be exalted."



But some of the powerful people thought to themselves, “Why do I need God’s honor, I already have enough honor here.” They were content with the false honor they received from the culture (Jn 12:43).

Several approached the bridge, but then doubted, “I can’t possible go to God’s honorable *village*; I am too shameful. As soon as I set foot on that side, all of my shame will be exposed and mocked.” They didn’t have the faith to believe that Jesus really took away all their shame (1 John 2:28).

But many decided to follow Jesus to the honorable side, even though it was not easy. As one man was leaving, he thought, “Others from my culture, perhaps even my family, may reject me, but I know that the honor from God on the other side will be far greater.”

Honor finally restored

As people crossed the bridge into God’s honorable *village*, God himself dashed from his *yurt* with great joy to embrace each person (Luke 15:11-31). To everyone who followed Jesus’ new path to honor, God gave them a *new golden robe without blemish or wrinkle* (Eph 5:26-27), *national hat, official documents saying they were his children with an inheritance* (Rom 8:16-18), *and a most honorable seat in the yurt* (Eph 2:6), regardless of their previous social status (1 Sam 2:3-8; Ps 113:7-9; Acts 15:8-9; Rom 2:10; 3:28-30).

People were finally living in God’s house, just as God intended from the beginning or creation. Everyone was excited about the new honor they had before God, and thankful to Jesus for taking their shame and opening a new path to honor. They were able to honor God and honor other people as they should, instead of always vainly seeking their own honor; God’s acceptance empowered them to live a new life.

However, the bridge that Jesus built is only temporary. In the future, Jesus will come again, but this time as a great judge to cleanse the shameful *village* of all dishonor, impurity, filth, and unfaithfulness (Rev 21:27). This means that all who do not accept God’s honor through Jesus will be stripped naked, have all their earthly possessions plundered, be sent away to prison for eternity. With their entire worldly honor stripped away, unbelievers will be tortured by their unbearable shame forever.

But God invites you to believe in Jesus for the removal of your shame and to follow him to honor.

Conclusion of Article

To formulate a similar gospel presentation for a different honor-shame culture, this author suggests three phases. First, study Scripture and theology with an eye of honor and shame elements. Reconceptualizing Christian theology is a paradigm shift that requires time and effort. Then analyze the local culture to learn about the nature of honor and shame, particularly how they are replicated, symbolized, and communicated. Since honor and shame are so axiomatic and foundational, do not expect easy answers to be waiting on the surface. Finally, experiment with a basic draft, seeking feedback from other missionaries, local Christians, and even local non-Christians, until the narrative can be easily retold by other Christians and intuitively comprehended by non-Christians.

Despite missiologists’ wide recognition of honor and shame as dominant cultural values in non-Western cultures, an honor-shame based theology has yet to be formulated. Honor and shame remain key theological issues to be addressed for the quantitative growth of the church among unreached peoples in the 10/40 window and the qualitative growth of the expanding church in the Global South.



A whiteboard animation video and Russian translation of this narrative are available at
WWW.HONORSHAME.COM.

