In his book *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis writes of a conversation between two different spirits, one of which feels very ashamed, embarrassed, and unworthy to enter heaven. When talking to this humiliated ghost, the other heavenly spirit says, “Could you, only for a moment, fix your mind on something not yourself?” (62). Looking at this statement, it seems rather contradictory for one who is humiliated and mortified by what he thinks is a shameful appearance to be accused of being proud and self-centered. Shame, a feeling that comes when one feels as if he has disappointed another or failed to reach a certain set of standards, is predictable and to be expected in everyone’s lives. Most people have desires to please others or at least live up to their own expectations, and when they fail to do so, a feeling of shame will arise. Despite the fact that the emotion of shame is uncomfortable and awkward, it can be welcomed, for it should be understood as a kind of trial that leads to humility. C.S. Lewis hints at this humility when he writes, “But the great test is that the recognition of the new standards is accompanied with the sense of shame and guilt: one is conscious of having blundered into society that one is unfit for. It is in the light of such experiences that we must consider the goodness of God” (*Pain* 30). Unfortunately, many people do not understand this and tend to move away from humility and towards its opposite, pride, which is a sin that clearly rejects God and His standards. Although many believe that shame is a beneficial feeling that inevitably leads to humility, shame, when coupled with the wrong response, can be a very dangerous emotion because it can lead to pride and, ultimately, a rejection of God.

Different responses to shame are realistically shown in Scripture, with one in particular being worthy of imitation and approval. Peter denies his association with Christ three times in John 18:17-27. Despite his humiliation, he is able to continue to pledge his loyalty to Christ and follow Him as it is recorded only a few chapters later in John 21:15-17. With this response, Peter shows the correct way to react to shame. Not only does he prevent shame from hindering his relationship with Jesus, but he lives out the commands that are later written in Romans 6:22, which encourage one to no longer be ashamed in and captive to sin but rather embrace the benefits of forgiveness, which are, in essence, sanctification and eternal life. This is shown when the writer of Romans says, “But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.” With his simple response of love to Christ’s questions of allegiance, Peter presents a sound example that one should follow (John 21:15-17).
Not only are there situations where people accept the forgiveness of God, but there is also one blatant example of the opposite. In contrast, Judas, who betrays Jesus to an even greater extent, does not accept any kind of forgiveness but rather looks for his own way to evade the feeling of shame by committing suicide (Matthew 27:1-6). His death provides an obvious example of an improper reaction to shame, for instead of choosing acceptance by God through forgiveness, Judas seeks his way out by setting his own standards and looking for a way to rid himself of the guilt apart from God. After mentioning Judas’s suicide, Dorothy Sayers writes, “And thereby Judas committed the final, the most pitiful error of all; for he despaired of God and himself, and never waited to see the resurrection” (Creed 24). With this statement, she implies Judas’s refusal of the salvation that the resurrection brings. It is when one follows Judas’s example instead of Peter’s that shame can begin to become dangerous.

In J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings, there are also two characters that mirror Peter and Judas. King Theoden, when his people are being threatened and his kingdom is susceptible to attack and outside domination, is in a situation that certainly has the ability to bring him grief and shame if it comes to pass. When given the opportunity to either ignore the advice given to him by a trusted and wise wizard or to take and act upon it, thus saving his kingdom, King Theoden chooses the latter (Tolkien, Lord 503, 507). Therefore, he humbles himself to take another’s counsel, similar to the way that Peter decides to follow Jesus after being questioned by Him and declaring his devotion. King Theoden is also comparable to Peter in the way that his loyalty, for a while, has not been where it should be, for Peter denies Christ and Theoden has been under the control of evil Wormtongue (Tolkien, Lord 501-503). Yet Theoden, like Peter, is able to change his allegiance and recognize his mistakes (Tolkien, Lord 503, 510). With these similarities, Theoden parallels Peter in a way that makes it possible for one to see the proper response to shame.

Likewise, there is not only a Peter-like character in The Lord of the Rings, but there is also an individual who can be seen to correspond to Judas in regards to shame. Lord Denethor, who is presented with circumstances similar to King Theoden’s, takes a different path out of the situation. Instead of being humble enough to accept advice given to him by Gandalf, and therefore saving himself from a potentially shameful position, he completely ignores the advice, commanding his servants to “‘Comfort me not with wizards! […] The fool’s hope has failed’” (Tolkien, Lord 741-742, 805). He continues to ignore Gandalf even when Gandalf says to him, “Whereas your part is to go out to the battle of your City, where maybe death awaits you. This you know in your heart” (Tolkien, Lord 834). When responding to advice, Denethor says, “But I say to thee, Gandalf Mithrandir, I will not be thy tool!”
which shows his stubbornness to be submissive to someone (Tolkien, *Lord* 835). Because he pays no attention to the
counsel, he, like Judas, still looks for a way by which he can rid himself of his plaguing shame. As a result, and in a
way that is strikingly similar to Judas, Lord Denethor deals with shame in a gruesome and sobering manner: suicide
(Tolkien, *Lord* 836). Because of his prideful action of rejecting a path that has the potential to bring him out of his
humiliating circumstances and instead turning to his own means, Denethor, like Judas, presents a corrupt reaction to
shame.

If, like Judas and Denethor, one chooses to reject the forgiveness offered by God or others, he will,
consequently, still long for a way by which he can clear himself of shame, and it is logical that he will turn to some
other means. By showing the desire of man to prevent or elude the consequential guilty feelings that follow shame,
C.S. Lewis reasons that man has no wish to stay in a embarrassing state of being and will make excuses for his
behavior. He says this when describing a law broken by mankind, “we cannot bear to face the fact that we are
breaking it, and consequently we try to shift the responsibility” (Lewis, *Mere* 6-8). This is shown as one uses self-
made standards as excuses that attempt to abolish embarrassment. In *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis says, “and you
will be drawn in, if you are drawn in, not by desire for gain or ease, but simply because at that moment, when the cup
was so near your lips, you cannot bear to be thrust back again into the cold outer world,” explaining that man will not
only attempt to eliminate shame through his own means but will also try to feel better through acceptance by other
people (153). Since feelings of humiliation still exist as a result of ignoring God’s compassion, one cannot bear to
continue on with these feelings but will strive for acknowledgment and approval by excusing the guilt or raising self-
esteeem through the admiration and acknowledgement of others. Therefore, although a person may not react to shame
as strongly as Judas and Lord Denethor did, it is still likely that he will look for his own way to deal with the remorse,
resulting in a rejection of the pardoning offered by God.

When one sets his own criteria for the purpose of abolishing shame by either recognition or acceptance, it
demonstrates that he rejects God’s standards and replaces them with his own self-centered ideology. This is,
essentially, pride. Dorothy Sayers identifies this when she describes pride as “the sin which proclaims that Man can
produce out of his own wits and his own impulses and his own imagination the standards by which he lives: that Man
is fitted to be his own judge” (*Creed* 150). By rejecting God’s provisions and substituting self-created principles, one
shows that he views himself greater than and in no need of God. C.S. Lewis describes pride as being “the complete
anti-God state of mind” (*Mere* 122). This happens as one maintains the mindset that he has no need for pardoning by
God. Instead, he will seek his own path out of shame and guilt, proving himself as thinking, “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul” (Sayers, *Creed* 152). Consequently, this kind of pride in one’s own ability swiftly hinders a relationship with God by rejecting His sovereign forgiveness.

As a result, when a person refuses to respond to shame by looking to God and instead follows Judas’s and Denethor’s examples by rejecting forgiveness and wise counsel, he begins a path to pride. After looking for a convenient and satisfying way to rid himself of shame, an independence from God is revealed and a dependence on self becomes evident. The culmination of these two lead to pride, for in attempting to look for one’s own way to establish self-worth instead of depending on God’s provisions of forgiveness causes one to proclaim himself in no need of God. Therefore, although shame is usually associated with humility, it should be treated as a potentially perilous and deceitful emotion, for separation from God and a form of pride are likely to appear when one chooses an inappropriate and selfish reaction towards shame.
Works Cited


