

Triumphing over
Sinful Fear



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Triumphing over Sinful Fear

John Flavel

Edited by
J. Stephen Yuille



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Preface

Years ago, my wife and I had the opportunity to visit Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. On the spur of the moment, we decided to go kayaking. Our guide organized a breakfast for us on the banks of the beautiful Zambezi River. He then provided a brief training session, followed by a stern warning: "This is a wild river. You'll have no problem with the crocodiles, as long as you remain in your kayak. But the hippos are another matter entirely. If they feel threatened by you, they'll strike from below." He proceeded to snap a twig and announced (with what I think was a twinkle in his eye): "A hippo will vaporize your kayak!" I was ready to back out, but the peer pressure was too great. And so we proceeded on our kayaking adventure. It was delightful until near the end of the trip, when we entered a narrow stretch in the river. Suddenly, four sets of eyes appeared on the surface of the water.

According to John Flavel, what I experienced at that moment is known as natural fear: "The trouble or perturbation of mind, from the comprehension of approaching evil or impending danger." For Flavel, such fear is an essential part of human nature (a key

to survival), because we fear what threatens us, and, in response, we avoid what we fear.

That definition is simple enough, but Flavel does not stop there. He proceeds to explain that natural fear can quickly turn into sinful fear. That happens when fear springs from “unbelief, and an unworthy distrust of God.” In other words, natural fear becomes sinful fear when we fail to trust God’s promises in the face of danger. Now, in speaking of danger, Flavel is not primarily concerned with hippos (although I am sure it applies on some level), but people—wicked people. He knows that Christians experience persecution and he knows that they are tempted to “distrust” God, thereby succumbing to sinful fear when the suffering associated with persecution looms large.

Such temptation is not a matter of mere conjecture for Flavel. On the contrary, he writes from experience. In 1662 in England, Parliament passed an Act of Uniformity, requiring ministers (who had not received Episcopal ordination) to be re-ordained. It also required ministers to declare their consent to the entire Book of Common Prayer and their rejection of the Solemn League and Covenant. The Church of England ejected those ministers (including Flavel) who refused to conform; they became known as dissenters or nonconformists. After his ejection from public ministry in the town of Dartmouth, Flavel continued to meet secretly with his former church members in order to preach the

Scriptures and administer the sacraments. But, when the Oxford Act prohibited all nonconformist ministers from living within five miles of towns that sent representatives to Parliament, Flavel was forced to move to a different village. His people still ventured to hear him preach in private homes or wooded areas; and he slipped regularly into Dartmouth to visit them. In 1687, the authorities finally permitted Flavel to resume preaching in public. He enjoyed this liberty until his death four years later at age sixty-four. This brief account of Flavel's ministry demonstrates that he was well-acquainted with persecution. He knew first-hand the ever-present danger of losing sight of God's promises and succumbing to sinful fear in the midst of suffering.

In this book Flavel handles this vital subject. He begins by examining the types and uses of fear in general. He then turns to sinful fear in particular, expounding its causes, effects, and remedies. In his chapter on remedies, he gives twelve "rules" for dealing with sinful fear. Interestingly, he states that the first eleven are "reducible" to the last: "Exalt the fear of God in your hearts, and let it gain the ascendant over all your other fears." In other words, the best cure for sinful fear is the fear of God.

Regrettably, many modern readers grow perplexed at the mere mention of the fear of God. They reject any notion that fear is to characterize the Christian's approach to God. After all, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear" (1 John 4:8a). However, in

making this assertion, they fail to understand that there are two ways to fear God: a good way and a bad way. Flavel affirms this distinction, but he does not develop it in this book. Because of the potential confusion, it is worth turning for a moment to his fellow Puritans, who are very careful to distinguish between what George Swinnock calls filial and servile fear, what William Gurnall calls holy and slavish fear, or what Stephen Charnock calls reverential and bondage fear. In short, they are careful to affirm that there are two different ways to fear God: a good way and a bad way, a godly way and an ungodly way. Their distinction is biblical. When the Israelites gather at the base of Sinai, they see the fire, smoke, and lightning, and they hear the thunder. As a result, they are terrified. But Moses says to them, "Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your face, that ye sin not." It appears that Moses commands the Israelites both to fear God and not to fear God. How do we explain this apparent contradiction? "Mark it," says John Bunyan, "here are two fears: a fear forbidden and a fear commended."

Forbidden (or ungodly) fear arises from the mere threat of God's punishment. In the above example, the Israelites fear God because they view Him as a threat. They regard Him as hazardous to their well-being. But this kind of fear fails to make any lasting impression upon their souls. Gurnall explains, "Often we see God's judgments leave such an impression on men's spirits that

for a while they stand aloof from their sins... but when they see fair weather continue, and no clouds gather towards another storm, they descend to their old wicked practices, and grow more bold and heaven-daring than ever." In short, forbidden fear is merely concerned with self-preservation. It does not take God's glory into account. On the contrary, it actually desires the removal of what it perceives as dangerous, meaning it desires the removal of God.

We find instances of such fear throughout Scripture. For example, in Moses' day, some of the Egyptian officials fear God. As a result, they bring their servants and cattle in from their fields in order to avoid the hail-storm. However, it is an ungodly fear. They are only concerned with avoiding the perceived threat. They are only concerned with alleviating the danger. A little later, Moses says to Pharaoh, "But as for thee and thy servants, I know that ye will not yet fear the LORD God." By way of another example, we read that the foreign inhabitants (transplanted by the king of Assyria after his invasion of Israel) fear God. They view Him as a potential source of harm, because He has sent lions among them to punish them for their idolatry. They commission one of the priests to instruct them in the worship of God. They go through the motions of worshipping Him, while continuing to serve their own idols. In brief, they take steps to minimize the perceived threat to their well-being while remaining steadfast in their sin and rebellion. That is the essence of ungodly (or forbidden) fear.

Commended (or godly) fear does not arise from a perception of God as hazardous, but glorious. In other words, it flows from an appreciation of God. According to William Gouge, it “arises from faith in the mercy and goodness of God.” When the soul feels “a sweet taste of God’s goodness” and finds “that in his favour only all happiness consists, it is stricken with such an inward awe and reverence.” Such fear inclines the soul to love what God loves and hate what God hates. In simple terms, this means that commended fear (unlike forbidden fear) makes a divorce between sin and the soul. C. H. Spurgeon (who drank deeply from the Puritans) describes this “divorce” as follows:

To a believing heart, God is all purity. His light is “as the color of the terrible crystal,” of which Ezekiel writes. His brightness is so great that no man can approach unto it. We are so sinful that, when we get even a glimpse of the divine holiness, we are filled with fear, and we cry, with Job, “I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth Thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” This is a kind of fear which we have need to cultivate, for it leads to repentance, and confession of sin, to aspirations after holiness, and to the utter rejection of all self-complacency and self-conceit.

Here, Spurgeon identifies three marks of godly fear: (1) “repentance and confession of sin”; (2) “aspirations after holiness”; and (3) “the utter rejection of all

self-complacency and self-conceit.” All of this means that we are no longer lovers of self and haters of God, but lovers of God and haters of self. As a result, we surrender ourselves to God’s will. Gouge provides a good summary: godly fear results in “a careful endeavour to please God” and “a careful avoiding of such things as offend the Majesty of God.”

It is precisely this fear that Flavel has in mind in this book. He defines it as “a gracious habit or principle planted by God in the soul, whereby the soul is kept under a holy awe of the eye of God, and from thence is inclined to perform and do what pleases him, and to shun and avoid whatever he forbids and hates.” For Flavel, this is a sure remedy for sinful fear. Knowing that Christians are prone to lose sight of God in the midst of suffering, he encourages them to look to the One whose power is “almighty,” whose wisdom is “infinite and unsearchable,” and whose love is “transcendent and unparalleled.” When they do, they will find cause to trust Him in the midst of life’s deepest trials.

J. Stephen Yuille
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Say ye not, A confederacy, to all them to whom this people shall say, A confederacy; neither fear ye their fear, nor be afraid. Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he shall be for a sanctuary.

—Isaiah 8:12–14a

There is as much diversity in people's inward moods and dispositions as in their outward features. Some are as frightened as rabbits and jump at every sound—even a dog's bark. Some are as bold as lions and face danger without trembling. Some fear more than they ought, some before they ought, and others when they ought not at all. The carnal person fears man, not God. The strong Christian fears God, not man. The weak Christian fears man too much and God too little.

There is a fear which is the effect of sin. It springs from guilt and hurries the soul into more guilt. There is a fear which is the effect of grace. It springs from our

love for God and His interest and drives the soul to Him in the way of duty. The less fear a person has, the more happiness he has—unless, of course, it is that fear which is his happiness and excellence.

It cannot be said of any person, as it is said of Leviathan: he is “made without fear” (Job 41:33b). The strongest people are not without some fears. When the church is in the storms of persecution, and almost covered with the waves, her most courageous passengers may suffer as much from this boisterous passion within as from the storm without. This is the result of not thoroughly believing or seasonably remembering that the Lord—Admiral of all the oceans and Commander of all the winds—is on board the ship to steer and preserve it from the storm. A weighty example of this very thing is found in the context, where we discover that the best people tremble in expectation of the worst events—both on the church in general and themselves in particular: “And it was told the house of David, saying, Syria is confederate with Ephraim. And his heart was moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind” (Isa. 7:2).

If their danger is measured by sense alone, then their fear does not exceed its cause. As a matter of fact, their danger seems to exceed their fear, for a foreign and cruel enemy (Assyria) is about to break upon them like a breach of the sea, and overflow the land of Immanuel: “Now, therefore, behold, the Lord bringeth up upon

them the waters of the river, strong and many, even the king of Assyria, and all his glory: and he shall come up over all his channels and go over all his banks” (Isa. 8:7). This verse describes the enemy as “waters” that quickly drown the country upon which they break. The next verse tells us how far this enemy will prevail and how close the country will come to total ruin: “And he shall pass through Judah; he shall overflow and go over, he shall reach even to the neck; and the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel” (Isa. 8:8). All the land, except the capital city, will be under water.

Having described the invading enemy’s power and success, God derides their plots and schemes (Isa. 8:9–10). Although He permits them to afflict His people for a time, for His own just and holy ends, He assures them that the issue of all their counsels and cruelties will recoil upon them and result in their own ruin and confusion. He then commands Isaiah to encourage the feeble and trembling hearts of those who fear Him in the midst of those terrifying times: “For the LORD spake thus to me with a strong hand and instructed me that I should not walk in the way of this people, saying, Say ye not, A confederacy” (Isa. 8:11–12a).

Speaking to the prophet with a strong hand, God uses the mighty impression that the spirit of prophecy makes upon his heart. He lays, as it were, His hand upon him, as a person does upon one to whom he is about to

impart some special secret in a familiar way. Drawing him close with a friendly hand, He says, "Come here, Isaiah. Take note of what I am about to entrust to you in respect to yourself and My elect people who follow you. Do not say, 'A confederacy,' to whomever this people say, 'A confederacy.' In other words, do not let these frightful tidings affect you the way they affect Ahaz and those with him. They are so terrified at the approaching danger that all their counsels, thoughts, and studies are occupied with preventing it. They seek an alliance with Assyria (Hos. 5:13). If that fails, then they will seek protection from some foreign power against Assyria. But their eyes do not look to Me for protection and deliverance. They expect more from Egypt than from heaven, more from a broken reed than from the Rock of Ages. Do not fear their fear! It drives them from Me to the creature. It first distracts them, and then ensnares them. In marked contrast, see that you and all the faithful in the land sanctify Me in your hearts, and make Me your fear and dread. Rely upon Me by faith in this day of trouble. See that you give Me the glory of My wisdom, power, and faithfulness by relying entirely upon My attributes that are engaged for you in so many tested promises. Do not give yourselves to sinful and vain dealings, as those who have no interest in Me nor experience of Me."

That is the text's general scope and design. In terms of its particulars, we find a sin condemned, a remedy prescribed, and a motive encouraged.

A Sin Condemned

“Neither fear ye their fear, nor be afraid” (Isa. 8:12b). This kind of fear is a sinful principle. It will incline them to do what their countrymen did, namely, to say “A confederacy.” Sinful fear will cause the best people to attempt to help themselves through sinful compromises. This is the fear that plagues the carnal and unbelieving Jews. It enslaves them in bondage of spirit. It is the fruit of sin, a sin in its own nature, and the cause of much sin. It is God’s just punishment upon them for their other sins. But Isaiah’s listeners must not permit their fear to produce in them such negative effects. They must not forget God, magnify the creature, or prefer their own schemes and policies to God’s almighty power and unchanging faithfulness.

A Remedy Prescribed

“Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread” (Isa. 8:13). The fear of God will swallow up the fear of man. A reverential awe and dread of God will extinguish the creature’s slavish fear, as the rain puts out the fire. To sanctify the Lord of hosts is to acknowledge the glory of His sovereign power, wisdom, and faithfulness. It includes not only a verbal confession, but internal acts of trust, confidence, and entire dependence upon Him. These are our choicest respects towards God, and give Him the greatest glory. Moreover, they are the most beneficial

and comfortable acts we perform for our own peace and safety in times of danger. If we look to God in the day of trouble, fear Him as the Lord of hosts (i.e., the One who governs all creatures and commands all the armies of heaven and earth), and rely upon His care and love as a child depends upon his father's protection, then we will know rest and peace. Who would be afraid to pass through the midst of armed troops and regiments, if he knew that the general was his own father? The more this filial fear has power over our hearts, the less we will dread the creature's power. When the dictator ruled at Rome, then all other officers ceased. Likewise, when the fear of God is dictator in the heart, all other fears will (in great measure) cease.

A Motive Encouraged

"And he shall be for a sanctuary" (Isa. 8:14a). If we sanctify the Lord of hosts by acknowledging Him and depending upon Him in times of danger, then He will be our sanctuary. He will surely protect, defend, and provide for us in the worst times and cases. "And the LORD will create upon every dwelling place of mount Zion, and upon her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night: for upon all the glory shall be a defense. And there shall be a tabernacle for a shadow in the daytime from the heat, and for a place of refuge, and for a covert from storm and from rain" (Isa. 4:5–6). Let the wind roar, the rain beat,

the lightning flash, we are in safety and have a good roof over our heads.

Conclusion

Two points of doctrine emerge from the above explanation of the text. First, the best people are easily overcome with slavish fear in times of imminent distress and danger. Second, the fear of God is the most effectual means for extinguishing sinful fear and keeping us from danger. These two doctrines capture the scope and substance of the text. In the following chapters, I will not belabor them, but focus my attention on the types, uses, causes, effects, and remedies of fear.