

WILLIAM SWAN PLUMER

William Swan Plumer (1802–1880) was a Southern Presbyterian pastor and theologian well-known for his doctrinal and experiential writings. God used the preaching and counsel of a faithful pastor to convict the teenaged Plumer of his sins and bring him to submit to Jesus Christ as his only righteousness. Plumer grew spiritually through reading the Bible and solid Christian literature such as John Flavel's *Fountain of Life*.

He soon sensed a call into pastoral ministry, completing his education at Washington College, and then Princeton Seminary under Archibald Alexander and Samuel Miller (1826). He served as an evangelist and church planter (1827–1831), and as a pastor of Presbyterian churches in Petersburg, Virginia (1831–1834), Richmond, Virginia (1834–1847), and Baltimore, Maryland (1847–1854).

From 1854 to 1862 he was a theological professor at Western Theological Seminary, Allegheny, Pennsylvania, also serving as a pastor in the Allegheny church. His pacifism led to the loss of these positions in the Civil War, during which he served briefly in other pastoral posts in Pennsylvania. For the last fourteen years of his life (1867–1880) he was professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary, South Carolina.

Plumer was a plain-speaking and powerful preacher even into his old age. He was also a prolific author, writing about thirty books and a hundred pamphlets, including devotional material, doctrinal treatises, and biblical commentaries. We might say that Plumer was America's J. C. Ryle, a simple yet profound proclaimer of God's sovereign grace in Christ, faithful to call sinners to Christ and to challenge Christians to practical holiness.

The Fear of God

God's Word clearly teaches that there is a fear connate with true religion. Once the Scriptures assert that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7), and twice that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. 111:10, Prov. 9:10). There is no higher wisdom than to fear God, as there is no true wisdom until He is feared. This is both alpha and omega in wisdom. The very first, and indeed the principal thing, to be instilled into all men's minds, is a religious sense of the divine Majesty, and an awful regard towards Him. With this agrees the prophet Isaiah: "The fear of the LORD is his treasure" (Isa. 33:6).

It is the more important to dwell upon this grace because it seems not to be spoken

of much. Very seldom is it a subject of pulpit discourse; rarely do we find it treated of at length in modern books; yet the Bible is full of it. Not only the Old Testament, but the New also, insists upon reverence and godly fear as essential ingredients of Christian character. Perhaps one reason why so little is said of it is that many minds are confused about its qualities. It will therefore be wise to seek to understand its nature, and the difference between it and other spurious kinds of fear.

Godly fear does not at all consist in servility and guilty dismay, nor in mere dread and terror. This kind of fear is neither holy nor useful. Indeed it sadly leads men astray and fits them for a life of sin. "Fear, if it have not the light of a true understanding concerning God wherewith to be moderated, breedeth superstition," says Thomas Hooker.

Godly fear consists with love. This is so true: the more we fear God, the more we

love Him; and the more we love Him, the more do we fear Him. It is not a destroyer but a regulator of other graces. Without it faith might become presumptuous, hope might lose its sobriety, love might degenerate into fondness or familiarity, and joy might become flippant. But where the heart is full of godly fear, all these unhappy results are avoided. Far from agitating, it calms and quiets the mind. It seems to give both gravity and cheerfulness. It moderates without depressing; it animates without intoxicating. It is good ballast to the ship in her passage through tempestuous seas.

This fear is a fruit of God's bounty. It is gracious. "[L]et us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28). Without an interest in God's favor, we can never make so excellent an attainment. It is a saving grace. It is declared to be a part of true religion in all dispensations. "They shall

fear thee as long as the sun and moon endure, throughout all generations" (Ps. 72:5). Thus religion without love is not more spurious than religion without fear. One of the most striking features of synagogue worship for centuries past has been an evident lack of profound reverence for God in the entire manner of conducting the religious services of the Jews.

The basis of this fear is found in the nature, word, and works of God. Jehovah is "the great and dreadful God." We must gain a knowledge of Him.

As the justice of God and His anger must be apprehended before He can be feared slavishly, so the majesty of God and His goodness must be understood before He can be feared filially. Who can stand in awe of a majesty he is ignorant of? Men, knowing not God's nature, have often presumed so much upon His mercy, that they have been destroyed by His justice.

Any right thoughts of God's amazing purity of nature will surely beget a pious fear of Him. Because He is "glorious in holiness," He is "fearful in praises."

As the approach of a grave and serious man makes children hasten their trifles out of the way; so would the consideration of this attribute make us cast away our idols, and our ridiculous thoughts and designs.

And not only God's majesty and holiness, but also His love and mercy beget a great fear of Him. So says the psalmist: "There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Ps. 130:4). So says Paul: "We receiving a kingdom, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28). The same is true of God's power and government. "Thou are great, and thy name is great in might; who would not fear thee, O King of nations?" (Jer. 10:6, 7).

Jesus Christ told us to fear Him who had power to cast into hell (Luke 12:5).

In like manner, to fear and tremble at God's Word is an effect produced on the heart of all the pious. So the Scriptures teach; so God's people experience. And how often does God awaken sentiments of fear, not only by exhibitions of His wrath and displays of His power, but by marvelous acts of His grace and mercy towards the rebellious and perishing (Ps. 40:3; Acts 2:43).

There are some remarkable examples of the fear of God recorded in Scripture. One is that of Moses, mentioned in Hebrews 12:21, where it is said that the giving of the law on Mount Sinai produced the deepest awe and even terror. "So terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake." A similar record is made by Isaiah: "In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the

temple. Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:1-5).

A still more remarkable effect, if possible, was produced on the prophet Habakkuk by an unusual display of God's glory. The song reads thus: "God came from Teman, and the Holy One from mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. And his brightness was as the light; he had horns coming out of his hand: and

there was the hiding of his power. Before him went the pestilence, and burning coals went forth at his feet. He stood, and measured the earth: he beheld, and drove asunder the nations; and the everlasting mountains were scattered, the perpetual hills did bow: his ways are everlasting. I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction: and the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. Was the Lord displeased against the rivers? Was thine anger against the rivers? Was thy wrath against the sea, that thou didst ride upon thy horses, and thy chariots of salvation? Thy bow was made quite naked, according to the oaths of the tribes, even thy word. Thou didst cleave the earth with rivers. The mountains saw thee, and they trembled: the overflowing of the water passed by: the deep uttered his voice, and lifted up his hands on high. The sun and moon stood still in their habitation: at the light of thine arrows they went, and at the shining of thy glittering

spear. Thou didst march through the land in indignation, thou didst thresh the heathen in anger. Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, even for salvation with thine anointed; thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked, by discovering the foundation unto the neck. Thou didst strike through with his staves the head of his villages: they came out as a whirlwind to scatter me: their rejoicing was as to devour the poor secretly. Thou didst walk through the sea with thy horses, through the heap of great waters. When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble" (Hab. 3:3–16).

A reason given by Paul for serving God with reverence and godly fear is that He "is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28, 29). A very high degree of holy fear is therefore

well founded. There is cause for adoring reverence for the heavenly Majesty.

Although there is not much said in modern writers respecting the fear of God, yet it was different with those who lived long ago. Thus says Bishop Hall: "There is a fear without diffidence, and a trembling that may consist with joy. Trembling is an effect of fear, but the fear which we must cherish is reverential, not slavish, not distrustful.... I will so distrust myself, that I may be steadfastly confident in the God of my salvation. I will so tremble before the glorious majesty of my God, that I may not abate aught of the joy of His never-failing mercy." So also Bishop Hopkins on the first commandment says,

Certainly we cannot have the Lord for our God unless we supremely fear and reverence Him. Yea, as the love, so the fear of God is made the sum of all the commandments, and indeed the substance of all religion; for, although it be but one particular branch and member

of that worship and service which we owe to God, yet it is such a remarkable one, and hath such a mighty influence upon all the rest, that oftentimes in Scripture it is put for the whole.

How clearly too does John Bunyan describe this virtue in his account of Mr. Fearing:

No fears, no grace. Though there is not always grace where there is the fear of hell, yet to be sure there is no grace where there is no fear of God.

Where this fear of God is genuine, it is not an occasional exercise but an abiding principle. "Be thou in the fear of the LORD all the day long" (Prov. 23:17). "Happy is the man that feareth always" (Prov. 28:14). "Rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:11). "Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear" (1 Peter 1:17). We are to "perfect holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). We are to work out our "salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). When

the Holy Spirit rested on Christ, it “made him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD” (Isa. 11:2, 3). Clearly, there is and can be no genuine piety without the fear of God.

Someone may ask how these views agree with the statement of John, that “there is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18). The proper answer is, that John is here speaking of servile fear, which, as he says, “hath torment”; whereas we are speaking of the fear which has no torment. John Newton says,

The Lord bids me “fear not”; and at the same time He says, “Happy is the man that feareth always.” How to fear and not to fear at the same time is, I believe, one branch of that secret of the Lord which none can understand but by the teaching of His Spirit. When I think of my heart, of the world, of the powers of darkness, what cause of continual

fear! I am on an enemy's ground, and cannot move a step but some snare is spread for my feet. But when I think of the person, grace, power, care, and faithfulness of my Savior, why may I not say, I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge? I wish to be delivered from anxious and unbelieving fear, which weakens the hands and disquiets the heart. I wish to increase in a humble jealousy and distrust of myself and of every thing about me.

Charnock says,

Men are apt to fear a just recompense for an injury done to another, that he will do him one ill turn for another; and fear is the mother of hatred. God being man's superior, and wronged by him, there follows necessarily a slavish fear of Him and His power; and such a fear makes wrathful and embittered thoughts of God, while he considers

God armed with an unconquerable and irresistible power to punish him.

But the fear which arises from just views of the whole of God's character produces very different effects, and is in fact very different in its nature.

The benefits of godly fear are many and of great value. It is the best preservative against sinful and dangerous alliances with the wicked. "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" (Isa. 8:12–13). How many wicked alliances are formed, and for no other reason than that men are led into them through a lack of sterling religious principle. The consequence is misery forever. From how many distressing entanglements men would be rescued by the fear of the Lord.

It also drives away that fear of man

which brings a snare. Christ says, "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which, after he hath killed, hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him" (Luke 12:4–5). Christ Himself proposes the fear of God as the great remedy for the fear of man. Nor is there any other that is found adequate. But this is enough. How justly does God rebuke that fear of man: "Who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man which shall be made as grass; and forgettest the LORD thy Maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth; and hast feared continually every day because of the fury of the oppressor?" (Isa. 51:12–13). It is not possible for us to fear God too much or man too little. So surely as we have just conceptions of the eternal power and majesty of God, we

shall have no tormenting fear of the puny arm of mortals.

The fear of the Lord inspires confidence and boldness in a righteous cause. That this is experienced by all God's people has been illustrated in a thousand striking cases in history, and is clearly declared in Scripture. "In the fear of the LORD is strong confidence, and his children shall have a place of refuge" (Prov. 14:26).

The fear of God is the great preservative against sin. Nothing could be more important than this. "Keep thyself out of sin, and fear nothing." If we can resist all temptations to sin, and be pure from iniquity, nothing can harm us. This may be done by proper fear of God. "The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death" (Prov. 14:27). The care of good men in all ages has been against sin. And as their spiritual enemies are very many and insidious, they have learned to be very afraid of that which in

others awakens no apprehension. They are cautious about little sins, and their cry is, "Take us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes" (Songs 2:15). In ancient vineyards, a tower was erected and a watch set there for birds, foxes, and thieves, the three great enemies of the vintage. Birds always, and thieves sometimes, approached vineyards in the daytime; but foxes commonly came at night. Larger foxes preyed much on poultry and on smaller animals, but the young foxes that ventured our resorted often to the vineyards in both day and night. They were numerous, cunning, greedy, and destructive. If they were many of them, they ruined the vintage. They did their work slyly; great vigilance was therefore requisite. Some suppose that in the passage just quoted, "tender grapes" represent young converts. The truth is that all Christians, and especially those who have but little knowledge of the deceitfulness

of sin and of the doctrines of Scripture, should be always on their guard.

But why should we give good heed to little things in the Christian life? It is a fair question; let it be answered. Many things which seem little are followed by the greatest consequences. One spark of fire has kindled a flame that burnt a city. A word has often shaped the course of an empire or determined the destiny of a soul. Until we see the end of a thing, we cannot tell whether its effects will be great or small. On earth we see the end of nothing in moral causes. They are mighty. They take hold on eternity. Their sweep is everlasting. Their effects are much more certain than those of natural causes. They work incessantly. Our greatest rivers have their rise in little springs whose streams are often buried under leaves and shrubs. The causes now at work in forming men's character seem contemptible to many. But a leak, though not larger than a rye straw,

will sooner or later sink a ship. The smallest opening made by a mole in the bank of a canal will of itself grow to a waste of all its waters. One weak link in a chain-cable causes the vessel to drift on the rocks. One of the most heroic deeds ever performed was suggested by the perseverance of the ant. A little white powder or a drop of some poisons is fatal to human life. A scratch has brought on inflammation that ended in death. A glance of the eye has led to crimes that will not be forgotten while eternity endures. A sentence has subverted the labors and schemes of a lifetime.

The greater part of human life is made up of acts that do not seem great in themselves, but the whole series completes the character. What is lighter than a word? Yet for every idle word that men shall speak they shall give account to God. What is quicker than thought? Yet as a man "thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7). As

“sands form the mountains and minutes make the year,” and as syllables compose the web of the greatest speeches, so many comparatively trivial acts determine the character. One harsh word now, another an hour from now, and so on, will prove a man a churl. A few irreverent words scattered along through a day mark a man as profane. One stealthy act of pilfering proves a man a thief. He who would not be convicted of grand larceny must avoid petty larceny. He who would not defile his soul with perjury must eschew lying. He who would not be found a liar must beware of equivocation. The sum of human character is made up of many apparently small things. Every great stream is fed by many lesser ones.

But what are the “little foxes”? One says they are worldly thoughts. This is true. Another says they are wrong opinions. This is as true. Another, no less wisely, says they are our hidden corruptions, our sinful

appetites and passions, that destroy our graces and comforts, quash good motions, and crush good beginnings. When men fear not little sins, they will soon fall into presumptuous iniquities. When they are not conscientious about minor duties, they will soon fail in weightier matters. He who cannot walk well cannot run well. Envy is the forerunner of murder, and naturally leads to it. Covetousness is the fountain of all theft. As a grain of sand will fret a sound eye and make it weep, so the least sin perceived will tenderly affect a good conscience. We must take and destroy these little foxes by a right use of the Word of God. It is clear. It is pure. By it are all God's servants warned. We must watch day and night. We must pray frequently and fervently. We must have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. We must make constant application to the blood of cleansing. Above all, we must be in the fear of the Lord all the day long. Blessed is

the man who avoids little sins and minds little duties; in the great steps of life he shall not be covered with dishonor. His heart is right. God is with him. Christ will never forsake him. "The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever" (Ps. 19:9).

Another benefit flowing from the fear of the Lord is freedom from worldly anxiety. In the passage quoted from Habakkuk, we saw how wonderfully the fear of God took possession of the prophet. In the words immediately following, he gives us that triumphant song: "Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon my high places" (Hab. 3:17-19). Thus

the greatest degree of holy trembling was followed by the highest degree of freedom from carking care about temporal affairs. All this is according to the promise, "The fear of the LORD tendeth to life: and he that hath it shall abide satisfied; he shall not be visited with evil" (Prov. 19:23).

The fear of God also quiets the afflicted soul and hushes all its agitations on the bosom of the eternal. Thus David speaks: "O God, thou hast cast us off, thou hast scattered us, thou hast been displeased; O turn thyself to us again. Thou hast made the earth to tremble; thou hast broken it: heal the breaches thereof; for it shaketh. Thou hast showed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment." In the midst of all this distress and perplexity, what shall be done? Who has courage and strength? The very next words are, "Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth" (Ps. 60:1-4).

The fear of the Lord also leads to communion with God. This is abundantly taught in Scripture. "The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will show them his covenant" (Ps. 25:14). Again, "The LORD taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy" (Ps. 147:11).

The cultivation of the fear of the Lord is the best means we can use to promote and retain revivals of genuine religion. Thus Luke, describing the state of the early church, says, "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied" (Acts 9:31).

On the other hand, if religion be not revived, if the love of many wax cold and wickedness abound, here is the way to avoid guilt and to please God. The prophet Malachi lived in times of unusual

and dreadful apostasy and sin, when men called the proud happy, when those who worked wickedness were exalted, when those who tempted God were even delivered. Yet he says, "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another; and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them as a man spareth his own son that serveth him" (Mal. 3:16–17).

Without the fear of the Lord, no service is acceptable, however decent, however costly, however painful. But with the fear of God, any commanded service is pleasing to God, however poor our offering may otherwise be. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl. 12:13).

The Difference between Slavish Fear and Childlike Fear

What is the difference between slavish fear and childlike fear? Slavish fear has its roots in the covenant of works; childlike fear, in the covenant of grace. Slavish fear is provoked by the consequences of sin; childlike fear, by the God-dishonoring character of sin. Slavish fear is motivated by legalistic servitude, looking for reward; childlike fear is motivated by voluntary obedience, looking for grace. In slavish fear, the enmity of our heart is not broken; in childlike fear, this enmity is broken. In slavish fear we have hard thoughts of God; in childlike fear we have high thoughts of God. Slavish fear hates punishment; childlike fear hates sin. Slavish fear seeks for self-preservation and self-honor; childlike fear seeks the preservation of the Lord's

attributes and honor. Slavish fear produces a convinced sinner; childlike fear, a truly convicted, converted sinner. Slavish fear looks for relief; childlike fear looks for welfare above relief.

Slavish fear is of a temporary character. "It is," as John Warburton said, "religion in fits and starts. It comes and goes." Childlike fear is more steady; it abides more deeply; it grows more profoundly in the soil of the heart. Slavish fear ultimately returns to the world. It clings to sin and is choked by the world. Childlike fear cannot return to the world; it parts from sin, and longs to be with God. Slavish fear never truly humbles the sinner as an unworthy sinner; childlike fear humbles the sinner as the chiefest of transgressors. Slavish fear leaves the eye closed to Christ; childlike fear has its eye fixed upon Christ.

Slavish fear has its own glory as its ultimate goal; it desires only a quieted conscience, peace and rest. Childlike fear

aims for the glory of God; true rest in God is its lofty goal. Slavish fear ends in damnation; childlike fear ends in salvation. Which kind of fear do we possess, my friends, slavish or childlike?

—Dr. Joel R. Beeke

Quotables on the Fear of God

“The fear of the Lord is that affectionate reverence by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law.”

—Charles Bridges

“Though there is not always grace where there is fear of hell, yet, to be sure, there is no grace where there is no fear of God.”

—John Bunyan

“The fear of God is the root and origin of all righteousness.”

—John Calvin

“As faith is a grace that feeds all the rest, so fear is a grace that guards all the rest.”

—William Secker

“The fear of God promotes spiritual joy; it is the morning star that ushers in the sunlight of comfort.”

—Thomas Watson