

Introduction

MY FIRST INTRODUCTION to the Puritans was a seminary course—almost twelve years ago. The required reading included John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Jonathan Edwards’s *The Religious Affections*, and Richard Baxter’s *The Reformed Pastor*. It was the closest I think I will ever come to an epiphany. I am exceedingly grateful, as it changed the course of my life—theologically, ecclesiastically, and spiritually. Since then, I have maintained a steady diet of Puritan writings. There are four reasons I keep coming back for more.

GOD-FEARING

To begin with, the Puritans are God-fearing. That is to say, they believe in a great and glorious God. “If God be so great a God,” writes George Swinnock, “how greatly is he to be revered! Canst thou do too much service for him, or give too much glory to him? Can thy love to him be too great, or can thy fear of him be too great . . . God is great, and therefore greatly to be feared.”⁹

Years ago, my wife and I had the opportunity to visit Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. On the spur of the moment, we decided to go kayaking. Our guide organized a breakfast for us on the banks of the Zambezi River. It was beautiful. 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

9. Swinnock, *Works*, 3:330.

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adventure. It was delightful until near the end of the trip when we entered a narrow stretch of the river. Suddenly, four sets of eyes appeared on the surface of the water.¹⁰

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.”¹¹ For Flavel, this is an essential part of human nature, meaning we fear what threatens us and, in response, we avoid what we fear. He proceeds to explain that there are two other kinds of fear: *holy* and *sinful*. Swinnock refers to these as *filial* and *servile*.¹² William Gurnall describes them as *holy* and *slavish*.¹³ Stephen Charnock labels them *reverential* and *bondage*.¹⁴ What are these Puritans talking about? Simply put, they are affirming that there are two ways to fear God: a *good* way and a *bad* way.

Their distinction is biblical. It is evident, for example, in Exodus 20. The Israelites are gathered at Sinai. They see the fire and smoke and hear the thunder. As a result, they are afraid. 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.”¹⁵ The distinction is also evident in 1 Samuel 12. The Israelites have sinned by requesting a human king. They see the rain and hear the thunder. As a result, they “greatly” fear God.¹⁶ But Samuel says to them, “*Fear not*: Ye have done all this wickedness: yet turn not aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart.”¹⁷ A little later, he adds, “Only *fear* the LORD, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you.”¹⁸ In short, both Moses and Samuel command the people not to fear God, yet 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.”¹⁹

10. The fact that I have written this should give some indication of how the incident turned out.

11. Flavel, *Works*, 3:245.

12. Swinnock, *Works*, 3:295.

13. Gurnall, *Christian in Complete Armour*, 1:119, 222, 263, 372, 373; 2:579.

14. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:27, 41, 98, 172, 231, 236, 254; 2:107–9.

15. Exod 20:20. Italics mine. All Scripture quotations are from the Authorized Version.

16. 1 Sam 12:18.

17. 1 Sam 12:20. Italics mine.

18. 1 Sam 12:24. Italics mine.

19. Bunyan, *Fear of God*, 29.

“Forbidden” fear, according to William Perkins, occurs “when a man only fears the punishment, and not the offence of God, or at least the punishment more than the offence.”²⁰ In the above examples, the Israelites fear God, because they view him as a perceived threat. In other words, they regard him as hazardous to their well-being. This type of fear is merely concerned with self-preservation; hence, it falls short of making any lasting impression upon the soul. 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.”²¹ In a similar vein, Charnock remarks, “Many men perform those duties that the law requires with the same sentiments that slaves perform their drudgery; and are constrained in their duties by no other considerations but those of the whip and cudgel. Since, therefore, they do it with reluctance, and secretly murmur while they seem to obey, they would be willing that both the command were recalled, and the master that commands them were in another world.”²² Charnock goes on to argue that people actually desire the annihilation of what they fear will harm them. This means that ungodly fear is tantamount to desiring the annihilation of God.²³

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 the field in order to avoid the devastation of the hailstorm.²⁴ 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.”²⁵ By way of another example, we read that the foreign inhabitants in the northern kingdom of Israel (transplanted by the king of Assyria after his invasion) fear God.²⁶ They view him as a source of potential harm, because he has sent lions among them to punish them for their idolatry. They commission one of the priests to instruct

20. Perkins, *Cases of Conscience*, 151.

21. Gurnall, *Christian in Complete Armour*, 1:289.

22. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:98.

23. *Ibid.*, 1:98–99.

24. Exod 9:20.

25. Exod 9:30.

26. 2 Kgs 17:25–41.

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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 ungodly (forbidden) fear.

“Commended” fear, in marked contrast, does not arise from a perception of God as hazardous, but glorious. In other words, it flows from an appreciation of God.²⁷ According to William Gouge, godly fear “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.”²⁸ This sense of “awe and reverence” inclines the soul to do what pleases God, and to avoid what displeases him.²⁹ In simple terms, this means that “commended” fear (unlike “forbidden” fear) makes a divorce between sin and the soul.³⁰ It causes us to pursue holiness.³¹ It compels us to surrender ourselves to God’s will. In short, it results in “a careful endeavour to please God” and “a careful avoiding of such things as offend the majesty of God.”³²

This motif is front and center in the Puritan mindset. It is found in all their writings from William Perkins to Jonathan Edwards. They are acutely aware of the fact that they serve a great God—a God greatly to be feared. As Matthew Henry expresses it: “Of all things that are to be known this is most evident, that God is to be feared, to be revered, served, and worshipped; this is so the beginning of knowledge that those know nothing who do not know this.”³³

27. By way of example, see Gen 22:12; 42:18; Exod 3:6; 2 Sam 6:9; 1 Kgs 18:3; Neh 1:1; Job 1:1, 8–9; 2:2; Acts 9:31; 10:2, 22; Phil 2:12; Heb 11:7; and 1 Pet 1:17.

28. Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, 8.

29. According to Flavel, godly fear “is 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” (*Works*, 3:252).

30. By way of example, see Lev 19:14, 32; 25:17, 36, 43; Josh 24:14; 1 Sam 12:24; Pss 2:11; 112:1; Prov 14:2; Eccl 12:13; Acts 10:1–2, 35; Rom 11:20; Eph 5:21; Heb 4:1; 12:28–29; and Rev 19:5.

31. In this connection, Paul writes, “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, *perfecting holiness in the fear of God*” (2 Cor 7:1). Italics mine.

32. Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, 8.

33. Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, 3:793.

HEAVEN-SEEKING

In addition to God-fearing, the Puritans are heaven-seeking. As a boy, I remember hearing a preacher warn his congregation: “Some people are too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good.” At the time, that statement struck me as odd. Is it really possible to be too heavenly-minded? For the Puritans, the answer is an emphatic *no*! As a matter of fact, they affirm the exact opposite: “Some people are of no earthly good, because they are not heavenly-minded enough.” Without heavenly-mindedness, we never persevere in the midst of affliction, never joyfully accept the loss of material possessions, never discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness, and never strive to mortify sin. In a word, without heavenly-mindedness, we never grow spiritually.

But what exactly is it? For the Puritans, it is a spiritual foretaste of the joy that awaits us at glorification. Robert Bolton provides such a *foretaste* by encouraging his readers to consider “the place which God and all his blessed ones inhabit eternally,”³⁴ “the beauty and blessedness of glorified bodies,”³⁵ and “the unutterable happiness of the soul.”³⁶ The apostle Paul confirms the validity of this approach, declaring, “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”³⁷ Here, he uses his power of reasoning to compare present “sufferings” and future “glory.” What is his conclusion? Interestingly, he does not conclude that future glory is slightly greater than present suffering; nor does he conclude that future glory is twice as great as present suffering; nor does he conclude that future glory is one hundred or one thousand times greater than present suffering. He concludes that future glory so far outweighs present suffering that we cannot compare the two.

What is this glory? Paul explains, “For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.”³⁸ “For we know,” he adds, “that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.”³⁹ The groans associated with childbirth express present pain and (at the same time) a future expectation. It is the same for creation. Paul uses

34. Bolton, *Four Last Things*, 96.

35. *Ibid.*, 105.

36. *Ibid.*, 113.

37. Rom 8:18.

38. Rom 8:19. The expression “earnest expectation” literally means to watch with head outstretched.

39. Rom 8:22.

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the imagery of childbirth, because creation's groans are anticipatory. One day, they will give birth to a new order—a new heaven and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.⁴⁰ This new order is linked to “the manifestation of the sons of God.” At that time, according to Flavel, we will be free from seven chains.⁴¹ (1) We will be free from “defiling corruptions.” The guilt of sin is pardoned by justification, and the power of sin is broken by sanctification, but the presence of sin is only removed at glorification. At that time, the lusts of the flesh and mind will be gone. We will enter a state of “perfect purity.” (2) We will be free from “sinking sorrows.” At present, because of affliction, we cry with Naomi: “Call me not Naomi [*pleasant*], call me Mara [*bitter*].”⁴² But the day is coming when we will be free from all suffering. As the apostle John declares, “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”⁴³ In a word, we will enter a state of “fullness of joy.” (3) We will be free from “entangling temptations.” The devil is relentless in his assault “against our souls.” However, in the future, “he can no more touch or affect the soul with any temptation, than we can batter the body of the sun with snow-balls.” We will enter a state of “everlasting freedom.” (4) We will be free from “distressing persecutions.” “We must spend our days,” says Flavel, “under the oppression of the wicked; yet this is our comfort, we know when we shall be far enough out of their reach.” At that time, we will enter a state of “full and perfect rest.” (5) We will be free from “pinching wants.” We have temporal wants. More importantly, we have spiritual wants. We lack faith, joy, peace, love, and zeal. Plus, we struggle in spiritual duties. These deficiencies plague us. At glorification, however, every want will be supplied. We will enter a state of “universal supplies.” (6) We will be free from “distracting fears.” In that day, “no wind of fear shall ever ruffle or disturb their souls, and put them into a storm any more.” We will enter a state of

40. Christ describes that event as the “regeneration” (Matt 19:28). Paul describes it as the gathering “together in one all things in Christ” and the reconciliation of “all things unto [Christ]” (Eph 1:10; Col 1:20). Peter describes it as “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2 Pet 3:13). John describes it as “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1). There is a beautiful description of that coming day in Isa 11:6–9. It culminates in these words: “For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”

41. Flavel, *Works*, 3:113–17.

42. Ruth 1:20.

43. Rev 21:4.

“highest security and rest.” (7) We will be free from “deluding shadows.” These are the deceitful vanities of the world. “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; All is vanity.”⁴⁴ These deluding shadows tempt us at present. One day, however, they will be but a shadow of a memory. And we will enter a state of “substantial good.”

On that day, God will fully restore his image in us. Our minds will perceive him as the greatest good, and our hearts will love him as the greatest good. He will impress his glory upon us to the fullest capacity of our souls, and we will be satisfied. For the Puritans, contemplation of that day leads to a spiritual foretaste of the joy that awaits us. It is, for this reason, that they repeatedly emphasize the need for heavenly-mindedness. As Richard Baxter remarks, “I would not have you cast off your other meditations; but surely as heaven hath the pre-eminence in perfection, it should have it also in our meditation. That which will make us most happy when we possess it, will make us most joyful when we meditate upon it.”⁴⁵

SIN-HATING

In addition to God-fearing and heaven-seeking, the Puritans are sin-hating. As a matter of fact, they go to great lengths to unmask sin’s repugnancy. Why? They know we only mortify sin when we hate it. Prior to leaving for a trip to Ireland in 1999, I dutifully turned off the electricity in our apartment. However, I neglected to empty the fridge and freezer. We were living in Portugal at the time. It was July—the warmest month of the year. Two weeks later, we returned to our home, unaware of what was lurking behind the door. When I opened it, the smell of the putrefying meat was so strong that I nearly fell to my knees. It is precisely that sense of repugnancy that the Puritans seek to cultivate through their dark portrayal of sin.

For starters, they seek to convey sin’s repugnancy by demonstrating its effect upon humanity. They go all the way back to Adam’s sin, which resulted in his alienation from God. That deprivation had a negative impact upon Adam’s faculties, meaning his will was no longer directed by an understanding that knew God or affections that desired God.⁴⁶ For the Puritans, that is the essence of original sin. Swinnock explains: “So hath original sin debauched

44. Eccl 12:8.

45. Baxter, *Practical Works*, 91.

46. See Eph 4:18–19.

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the mind, and made it think crooked things straight, and straight things crooked; loathsome things lovely, and lovely things loathsome; perverted the will, and made it, as a diseased stomach, to call for and eat unwholesome meat against his own reason; enthralled his affections to sensuality and brutishness; chained the whole man, and delivered it up to the law of sin, and laid those strengths of reason and conscience in fetters, by which it might be hindered in its vicious inclinations and course of profaneness.⁴⁷ Here, Swinnock affirms that original sin has “debauched” the mind, “perverted” the will, and “enthralled” the affections. In essence, original sin has “chained the whole man.” Bolton echoes this sentiment, stating, “My mind is blind, vain, foolish, my will perverse and rebellious, all my affections out of order, there is nothing whole or sound within me.”⁴⁸ That has been the predicament of Adam’s posterity ever since the fall. Because of the corruption of his nature, Adam could not transmit the perfect nature of his soul to his descendants. Instead, he transmitted the corrupt nature acquired by the fall. As a result, all of us are “dead in trespasses and sins.”⁴⁹

The Puritans also seek to convey sin’s repugnancy by demonstrating its affront to God. They make it clear that at the root of all sin is the desire to substitute God with *self*. This necessarily means that sin is opposed to God’s sufficiency. In the words of Jeremiah Burroughs: “As far as sin appears, it holds this forth before all and speaks this language: that there is not enough good in God, that is, the Blessed, Glorious, All-Sufficient, Eternal, Unchangeable Good and Fountain of all Good. Yet sin makes this profession, that there is not enough good in God to satisfy this soul, or else why does the soul depart from him in any sinful way and go to the creature for any good if there is enough in God himself?”⁵⁰

Not only is sin opposed to God’s sufficiency, but it is opposed to God’s existence. For Ralph Venning, sin “makes the sinner wish and endeavour that there might be no God, for sinners are haters of God.”⁵¹ Swinnock agrees, “Sin is incomparably malignant, because the God principally injured by it is incomparably excellent.”⁵² It is “a breach of this incomparable God’s law,” “a contempt of this incomparable God’s authority,” “a dishonouring

47. Swinnock, *Works*, 2:166.

48. Bolton, *Carnal Professor*, 19.

49. Eph 2:1.

50. Burroughs, *Evil of Evils*, 58.

51. Venning, *Sinfulness of Sin*, 35.

52. Swinnock, *Works*, 4:456.

this incomparable God, whose name alone is excellent,” and “a destroying this incomparable God.”⁵³

Due to their vivid portrayal of sin, the Puritans are often viewed as dark and dour killjoys. That is an unfortunate misrepresentation. Their description of the depths of our depravity is entirely biblical. Moreover, it is absolutely necessary as it arises from their firm conviction that we only mortify what we hate. A view of sin’s repugnancy is the only thing that will produce the necessary impetus for mortification—the daily overthrowing of sin’s dominion.

CHRIST-EXALTING

The final reason why I am continually drawn to the Puritans is the fact that they are Christ-exalting.⁵⁴ In the opening verses of his epistle to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul tells us that we are “blessed” in Christ, “chosen” in Christ, “redeemed” in Christ, “predestined” in Christ, and “sealed” in Christ.⁵⁵ His point is that salvation from start to finish rests upon Christ. For the Puritans, there is nothing more soul-satisfying than contemplating Christ and our interest in him. In the words of John Owen, “Unto them that believe unto the saving of the soul, [Christ] is, he always hath been, precious—the sun, the rock, the life, the bread of their souls—everything that is good, useful, amiable, desirable, here or unto eternity.”⁵⁶

It is this soul-satisfying contemplation of Christ that I seek to expound in the present work: *Looking Unto Jesus*.⁵⁷ For assistance, I turn to two lesser-known Puritans: Thomas Wilcox and Vavasor Powell.⁵⁸ I have selected these

53. *Ibid.*, 4:457–58.

54. They are not unique in this regard. For a brief synopsis of this emphasis in John Calvin, see Alexander, “The Supremacy of Jesus Christ,” 109–18.

55. Eph 1:3–14.

56. Owen, *Works*, 1:3.

57. The title is taken from Heb 12:1–2, “Run with patience the race that is set before us, *looking unto Jesus* the author and finisher of faith; who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Italics mine.

58. In describing Thomas Wilcox and Vavasor Powell as Puritans, I am not referring to their political or ecclesiastical views but their piety—what we might call “experimental Calvinism.” The Puritans hold to the conviction that we must experience an affective appropriation of God’s sovereign grace, moving beyond intellectual assent to heartfelt

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two—in part because of their anonymity—but more importantly because both are Baptists. Interestingly, seventeenth-century Baptist piety and Puritan piety intersect at numerous junctures. One of my goals is to demonstrate this interconnectedness as it pertains to their Christ-centered piety.

As for methodology, my approach is simple. Chapter 1 contains an edition of Thomas Wilcox's *A Guide to Eternal Glory*. Chapter 2 analyzes his Christ-centered piety, focusing on what he says about our need to apply Christ's blood, seek Christ's presence, prize Christ's righteousness, and esteem Christ's priesthood. Chapter 3 contains an edition of Vavasor Powell's *Saving Faith Discovered in Three Heavenly Conferences*. Chapter 4 analyzes his Christ-centered piety, focusing on his description of Christ as Shepherd, Judge, and Husband.

My prayer is that the Lord will use the following chapters to heighten your appreciation of Puritan (and early Baptist) piety and, above all else, point you to “the unsearchable riches of Christ.”⁵⁹

dedication to Christ. This piety transcends the divide that exists between those of differing political and ecclesiastical views: Independents and Presbyterians, Parliamentarians and Royalists, Conformists and Nonconformists. For more on this, see Yuille, *Puritan Spirituality*, 5–17.

59. Eph 3:8.