

# WHEN PEOPLE ARE BIG AND GOD IS SMALL

Overcoming Peer Pressure,  
Codependency, *and the Fear of Man*

Second Edition

**Edward T. Welch**

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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A Scripture quotation from the New Testament uses the ESV's alternate, foot-noted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

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# Preface to the Second Edition

Some books are classics. You read them again and again, and they seem to get better. No need for any updates. My books, I think, are best if they are refreshed every three years or so. By the time a book is published, I can already think of a number of changes I would like to make. Three years later, I wish I could redo the entire book. But second editions take work, and I tend to focus more on a project that is ahead of me than the ones behind me, so I rarely get to those changes.

Not this time. P&R Publishing and Dave Almack graciously offered me the opportunity to take another look at *When People Are Big*—after twenty-six years—and Amanda Martin was a huge help (thank you, Amanda). The result is that much was added; much was tightened or removed; exclamation marks, which I now assiduously avoid, were deleted (if you see any it means that Amanda went rogue); and I was edified through the entire process, even when my old computer, now replaced, decided not to save a significant amount of work.

The first edition of this book was a team effort. It included John Bettler, Paul Tripp, David Powlison, Susan Lutz, Sheri Welch, and the CCEF staff. For this second edition, I have not forgotten those whose help was so essential to the first, and I deeply miss David and feel the loss of Susan. Sheri continues to be the catalyst for change

and growth in my life, and she was gracious—again—when I was preoccupied with sections that seemed stuck. And she still knows when we should go out for a walk.

Perhaps in another twenty-six years, P&R will make the offer again.

## INTRODUCTION

# Love Tanks with a Leak

Thank you for joining me on this walk through a struggle that we all share. *We spend so much time wondering what people think about us.* We are so easily controlled by their opinions or possible opinions. Sometimes we get angered by what they think or say. Other times we would like to disappear.

It is everywhere.

- A woman decided she was “one big failure” as she compared herself to her seemingly competent peers.
- A teenager came up for air after being submerged in an online world, only to feel more left out, depressed, and confused about her identity—yet with a little bit of snark as she located a few inferior types worthy of disdain.
- A young man was a slave to his need for respect. It came out as anger, yet that anger covered his feeling that he was much less impressive than he hoped to be.
- A man would not admit to feeling inadequate or insignificant, but he certainly knew how to make his wife feel that way.

The problem is an ancient one, but it has been accelerating. In our connected world we simply have access to a lot more opinions.

The extreme comments, lack of comments, and constant comparisons leave us more isolated and desperate.

I have thought about this struggle for years, yet it has not faded away in my own life. I was leading an all-day seminar at a church, and by midday it was so quiet you really could hear a pin drop. Most every person was, I am fairly certain, hoping that I would finish early if they didn't interrupt me. As we were leaving, I mentioned these observations to my wife. She kindly protested that I was not reading the room accurately, but I found it interesting that she offered no evidence.

How did I respond? I simply hoped that I could forever avoid the kind folks who endured until 5:00 p.m.

This, of course, got me in the mood to revisit the topic at hand. Call it *desire for reputation, need for respect, peer pressure, people pleasing, codependency*, we can still be controlled by other people. A moment of rest from it would be welcome.

## A Personal Awakening

My awakening to this problem came when I was a high-school senior. I had always been self-conscious, controlled by what my peers thought (or *might* have thought), but I never considered it seriously until the day of the awards assembly.

I had been nominated for an award, and I was scared to death I would get it.

The auditorium was bulging with over two thousand high-school juniors and seniors. From the back, where I liked to sit, the platform seemed to be a good mile or two away. All I could think of was what my classmates would think of me while I walked to the front. Would I walk funny? Would I trip going up the stairs? Would one person—I prayed it wouldn't be a girl I liked—think I was a jerk? What would I ever say in my brief acceptance speech?

*God, please don't let me get this.*

After a number of lesser awards were announced, the vice principal went to the podium to introduce the final winner. He began with a short, somewhat cryptic biographical sketch. It didn't sound *exactly* like me, but it was generic enough to fit. I was starting to sweat, but I sat motionless for fear that someone would think I was getting interested. Finally, the announcement came: "the winner of this year's senior award is . . ." *not* Ed Welch.

You can imagine my reaction. Relief? Not quite. I felt like a total failure. *Now* what would people think of me? They knew I was up for the award, and someone else had been chosen. What a loser.

My mind immediately began spinning out justifications. *If I had worked at all this year, I would have won. I certainly had the potential—I just didn't care. Just wait till I get to college, I'll show them.*

I was ashamed to go back to class. Pitiful, isn't it?

Later that day, the events replayed in my mind. *What a mess, I reflected. I live like a frightened kid. I am controlled by what other people might think* (and they probably thought much less often about me than I imagined, which was another problem). But I didn't know where to go from there. As far as I could tell, there was no way out. This was my life. Self-consciousness, being controlled by the opinions of others, or whatever it was called, could only be managed, not cured. Perhaps future successes would help.

Or (and I thought this was quite clever) I could embellish one of the justifications that had crossed my mind earlier in the day. I could do well but never wholeheartedly devote myself to any particular task. Then, when I wasn't successful and my self-esteem was in the dumpster, I could tell myself that I *would* have been the best if I had worked harder. At least I could think I was okay, for what that was worth.

I had no answers, but the events of the day brought these issues to the front of my mind. It was, at least, an awakening.

In college, I tried to combat this beast with a few quasi-successes in academics and athletics, and I used the I-could-have-done-better-if-I-had-really-tried strategy, but this *thing*



remained. I was a Christian, but that didn't help me to put up a fight. I still felt it. Every rejection, every perceived failure, every person I wanted to be noticed by who didn't notice me reminded me that in my heart I was still the kid sitting in the back of the high-school auditorium.

## Okay in Christ

A few changes took place during my seminary days. In my first year, I had the opportunity to lead a Bible study on the book of Romans. I had already considered the book's theme of justification by faith, but this time it seemed especially relevant because I made a connection between my dependence on the opinions of other people and justification by faith. My reasoning, not original with me, was that I didn't have to measure up to the standards of others' opinions because God's opinion of me was rooted in the finished work of Jesus. In other words, even though I was a sinner, God loved me and made me righteous in his sight, *so who cared what other people thought?*

This seemed to give me the freedom I needed. I didn't have to be concerned about the opinions of others. I simply had to be aware of God's opinion of me. I was a beloved son. A saint. Okay in Christ. Great.

Over the next few years, I was still overly concerned about the opinions of others, but I would quickly remind myself that I didn't have to measure up to what they might be thinking.

*Who cares what they think?* I tried to persuade myself. *So what if they don't think I'm great?* I figured that if Jesus thought I was great, that should be enough.

I *thought* my treatment was working, though I occasionally wondered, *Is it really Christ that I am standing on, or am I standing on me—my perceived successes and the favorable opinions of others?* After all, I was going to seminary, and many people approved

of that decision. Maybe I felt good about myself because *they* felt good about me. Or maybe I felt good about myself because I had done respectably in athletics and had decent grades, *compared to other people*. Maybe I had taken pride in my ministry aspirations, *compared to other people and their seemingly lower spiritual goals*. Maybe I found an identity in being “nice”—or at least nicer than some.

In short, I wondered if I was still being ruled by the opinions of others, but since I was feeling fine, I wasn’t motivated to investigate further. I certainly wasn’t going to talk to anyone else about it—that would have been too embarrassing.

Then I got married.

## **The Great Awakening**

Marriage has been a privilege and blessing to me. It was also the context for a surprising discovery: I found that being okay in Christ was not quite enough for me. When I was first married, I knew that Jesus loved me, but I also wanted my new wife to be absolutely, forever smitten with me. I *needed* love from her. I could finally handle small amounts of rejection from other people, but I felt paralyzed if I didn’t have the love I needed from her. I needed *unconditional* love. If she didn’t think I was a great husband, I would be crushed (and a little angry).

This led to a second discovery. I suddenly realized that I had mutated into a walking love tank. I was empty and looking for another person to fill me. My bride was indeed gifted in being able to love, but no one could possibly have filled me. I was a love tank with a leak.

I tried the old biblical answers that had worked before my marriage, but they were useless to me. They didn’t go far enough. In fact, they were almost irrelevant. They reminded me of times when, after I’d been politely dumped by a girl, my parents would try

to cheer me up by saying, “We love you no matter what.” I always appreciated their attempts, but, as all parents and children know, they didn’t help. Sure, it was nice that my parents loved me, and it would have been much worse if they had *not*, but I wanted *somebody else* to love me.

Since those days, I have spoken with hundreds of people who have ended up in this same place: they are fairly sure that God loves them, but they also want or *need* love from other people—or at least they need *something* from other people. As a result, they feel empty. They are nothing, and they are controlled by whomever or whatever they believe can give them what they think they need.

It is true: what or who you need will control you.

## Facing the Fear of Man

Scripture identifies this epidemic of the soul as the *fear of man*.<sup>1</sup> In the Bible, those afflicted with it were avowed worshippers of the true God, but they feared other people. That is not to say that they were terrified by or afraid of others, although sometimes they were. *Fear* in the biblical sense is a much broader word. It includes being afraid of someone, but it extends to holding someone in awe, being controlled or mastered by someone, worshipping someone, putting trust in someone, or needing someone more than needing God.

The fear of man can be summarized this way: We replace God with people. Instead of a biblically guided fear of the Lord, we fear others.

Of course, the fear of man goes by other names. When we are in our teens, it is called *peer pressure*. When we are older, it is

1. As used in Scripture, the word *man* includes men, women, and children. When I use the biblical expression *fear of man* in this book, I am not limiting my focus to the male gender. I am assuming, as the Bible does, that every person in our lives has the potential to control us.

called *people pleasing*. Men identify it as a need for respect. It was popularly called *codependency*. We can see it everywhere.

*Have you ever struggled with peer pressure?* If you experienced this struggle when you were younger, believe me, it is still there. It may be submerged and revealed in different ways now that you are an adult, or it may be camouflaged by your impressive résumé (your perceived successes).

*Are you overcommitted?* Do you find it hard to say no even when wisdom indicates that you should? You are a *people pleaser*.

*Do you “need” something from your spouse or your friend?* Do you “need” your spouse to listen to you? Respect you? When we look for life and contentment in *anything* created, we will be disappointed. In marriage, your spouse will become the one you fear. He or she will control you. Whatever you need will control you. When you do not have it, you will feel empty and hopeless because you don’t have what you need or angry because you deserve what you need. Your spouse will quietly take the place of God in your life.

*Is self-worth or self-esteem a critical concern?* This is a popular way that the fear of other people is expressed. If self-esteem is a recurring theme for you, chances are that your life revolves around what others think. You need them to buttress your sense of well-being and identity. You need them to fill you up.

*Do you ever feel as if you might be exposed as an impostor?* Many business executives and apparently successful people do. A fear of being exposed in this way is an expression of the fear of man. It means that the opinions of other people—especially their possible opinion that you are a failure—are able to control you.

*Are you always second-guessing decisions because of what other people might think? Are you afraid of making mistakes that will make you look bad in other people's eyes? That's fear of man.*

*Do you feel empty or meaningless? Do you experience "love hunger"? If you need others to fill you, you are controlled by them.*

*Do you get easily embarrassed? If so, people and their perceived opinions probably define you. Or, to use biblical language, you exalt the opinions of others to the point where you are ruled by them.*

*Do you ever tell lies, especially little white lies? Do you attempt cover-ups even if you are not technically lying with your mouth? Lying and other forms of living in the dark are usually ways to make ourselves look better before other people. They also serve to cover our shame before others.*

*Are you jealous of other people? If so, you are controlled by them and what they have.*

*Do other people often make you angry or depressed? Are they making you crazy? If so, they are probably the controlling center of your life.*

*Do you avoid people? If so, even though you might not say that you need people, you are still controlled by them. Isn't a hermit dominated by the fear of man?*

*Do you dream about losing weight or bulking up? Aren't most diets, even when they ostensibly fall under the heading of "health," dedicated to impressing others? Our desire for the praise of others is one of the ways we exalt people above God.*

Have all these descriptions missed the mark? When you compare yourself with other people, do you feel good about yourself? Perhaps the most dangerous form of the fear of man is the “successful” fear of man—people who think they have made it. They have more than other people. They feel good about themselves. But their lives are still defined by other people rather than God.

## **A Universal Problem**

Don't think the fear of man is a problem only for shy, withdrawn types. Isn't the angry person or the person who tries to intimidate also controlled by others? Any form of one-upmanship qualifies. What about the manager who is working to be more productive than an associate in order to get ahead? The endless jockeying of egos in the corporate boardroom is an aggressive version of fear of man. And do you think that the super confident superstar athlete is somehow above seeking the good opinions of fans and sportswriters? Aggressively asserting that you don't need anyone is just as much an evidence of the fear of man as the more timid examples we have seen. Fear of man comes in these packages and many others.

Have our criteria included you yet? If not, consider just one word: *evangelism*. Have you ever been too timid to share your faith in Christ because others might think you were an irrational fool?

Fear of man is part of our human fabric. How nice it would be to actually feel comfortable in our own skin rather than needing to *be* somebody or searching for that drop of love or sliver of approval from someone. Yes, nice, but it seems like a mere dream.

## **The Search for a Biblical Response**

A common answer to the fear of man is “I just need to love *myself* more.” That would make us less dependent on the affirmation

of others, but it is a paper-thin solution and never gets us to comfortable-in-our-own-skin contentment.

An answer that has more depth is “*God* loves me more than I know.” God can fill us with love, so we don’t have to be filled by other people. But even this answer is incomplete. The love of God is the answer to every human struggle, but sometimes we can use it in such a way that God’s job is to make us feel better about ourselves, as if feeling better about ourselves were our deepest need. God does not promise such things.

The purpose of this book is to take the answer deeper still. As we step further into Scripture, we will meet people such as Abraham and Peter, who slipped into the chasm of the fear of man and brought others down with them. We will look at the subtle ways in which our fear surfaces in our lives. Then we will find God’s way out.

To really understand the roots of the fear of man, we must ask the right questions. For example, instead of asking, “How can I feel better about myself and not be controlled by what people think?” a better question is “Why am I so concerned about self-esteem?” or “Why do I have to have someone—even Jesus—think I’m great?” We will look at these topics from many angles throughout this book. Included in the answer is the fact that we need to think *less often* about ourselves. We’ll talk about why—and how.

The most radical treatment for the fear of man is the fear of the Lord. God must be bigger to you than people are. This antidote takes time to grasp; in fact, it will take all our lives. But my hope is that the process can be accelerated and nurtured through what we study in this book.

Regarding other people, our problem is that we *need* them for ourselves more than we *love* them for the glory of God. God sets us the task of *needing* them less and *loving* them more. Yes, it is counterintuitive, as so many of God’s ways might first appear, but settle into them and you find yourself on the road to freedom and rest.

One important note before we begin exploring. Our interest is in the human experience of being dominated by the real or imagined opinions of other people. God has given us two ways to enter in. One is the fear of man, which follows what *we* bring to that problem. The other is shame, which is what *other people* bring, and other people can bring a lot. When you have been wronged or abused by other people, they will have an enduring impact in your life. What might surprise you is how much God says to you in your shame.

Fear of man and shame are relevant to all of us. I have delved into the details of God's words on shame in another book,<sup>2</sup> so while I will discuss both here, I will *focus* on the fear of man.

Let's get started.

2. Edward T. Welch, *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012).



Part 1

*HOW AND WHY WE  
FEAR OTHERS*

# 1

## “People Will See Me”

If needing or fearing people is as universal a problem as it seems, then we would expect Scripture to be filled with rich descriptions of it and in-depth teaching about it. And it is. “The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe” (Prov. 29:25). One of the Bible’s dominant questions is “Whom will you fear [need, be controlled by]?” Will you fear God or people?

Scripture gives three basic reasons why we fear other people, and we will look at each of them in turn. We fear people because they can

- expose and humiliate us,
- ridicule and reject us, and
- attack, threaten, or oppress us.

These three reasons have one thing in common: they see people as “bigger” (that is, more powerful and significant) than God, and, out of the fear that creates in us, we give other people the power to tell us what to feel, think, and do.

### **The Fear That Comes from Shame**

The first reason we fear other people is that they can expose or humiliate us. In other words, shame leaves us vulnerable to the

fear of man. That was apparent from the beginning. Immediately after Adam and Eve sinned, “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (Gen. 3:7). The scene quickly descended into finger pointing and accusing, which is to say, “That person is worse than me.”

This was the debut of the fear of man. Shame consciousness. Exposure, vulnerability, and desperate need of covering or protection. Under the gaze of the holy God and other people.

### **Shame from Sin**

First came *the look* from the other person. It was as if, for the first time, the man and woman stared at each other in judgment. After that came the even more penetrating look from God. Both were so disturbing that Adam and Eve hid, and we are still hiding today.

Adam and Eve had known they were naked before they sinned, but, in their state of innocence, this had never provoked a look of judgment. This look was different. It could see a deeper nakedness—at least, the one who was being observed *felt* more exposed.

The man and woman tried coverings, but fig leaves could not alleviate this deeper shame. What had once been a blessing—knowing and being known—was now a curse. What had once been a loving meeting of the eyes became impolite and intrusive.

At the moment of Adam’s sin, shame became a cornerstone of human experience: “What do *they* think of me? What does *God* think of me?” In a moment, humanity felt unacceptable.

In a curious twist, it was the gaze of the other person that the man and woman felt most. Adam and Eve covered themselves when they were seen *by each other*. God, of course, sees all things. Other people do not, and other people are not much different from ourselves. So it is surprising that we are usually more concerned about other people than God. But this is a key feature of our fear of man. Since sin entered the world, we see God less clearly and are less attentive to him, but we are acutely, if not painfully, aware of other people’s scrutiny.

## **Shame from Being Victimized or Sinned Against**

In the course of human spiritual history, a variant of shame emerged. Original shame was the result of our sin, the result of our being unclean and naked both before the holy God and before others. Later, shame was also the result of being sinned *against*: of being victimized or dishonored by others.

This second form of shame can be “caught” by contact with something unclean. For example, when Dinah was raped by Shechem, she was “defiled” (Gen. 34:5). This does not mean that Dinah was responsible for what happened to her. The point is that even though she had not sinned, there was a sense in which her purity was marred, and it changed everything.

“I feel like I have a neon sign across my forehead that says, ‘I have been raped by my uncle,’” said one woman. She could be a spokesperson for thousands of others. “I am afraid to be with other people because I might contaminate them,” said another victim.

Other people can do things to us that make us unclean. If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife, the innocent spouse is shamed or dishonored, literally “made naked” by another’s sin (see Lev. 20:11, 17, 19–21). Unruly children bring shame and disgrace on their parents (Prov. 19:26).

In the Old Testament, the temple was defiled because unclean men entered it (Ps. 79). A similar thing happened when Israelites touched the carcass of an animal that had been declared unclean. Those who touched it, even accidentally, had to wash their clothes and were considered unclean until the evening (Lev. 11:24).

There are two ways that we can become naked or unacceptable. The first is the nakedness that is due to our sin. The second is nakedness that we experience because of the sin of other people. What gets confusing is that shame from victimization feels identical to the shame we feel from our own sin, even though the cause is very different. Victims feel embarrassed, humiliated, and disgraced because of others’ sins against them. They feel unclean,

naked, and unable to cover themselves. They feel as if they are under the all-knowing gaze of others, and they fear people.

Both sin and shame share a common treatment: rest, cleansing, and acceptance is found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But keep in mind the difference between the two. Sin is something we have done; victimization is done to us.

## **Hiding and Spying**

When you feel exposed, one instinct is to cover your face. Children do that. “Don’t look at me” or “If I can’t see you, then you can’t see me.” Since our hands are no long-term solution, we can turn to something more durable: we live behind walls.

This is where the fear of man makes its full entrance. The problem with the fear of man is not the shame of sin or victimization. The problem is that we use our own strategies to protect ourselves and improve our reputation.

So we build walls.

“The walls are ten feet thick. Nobody can come in, and I can’t get out.” These desperate coverings isolate, but they also protect us from the gaze of other people. In practice, these walls can be built with thousands of different materials: money, fame, athletic accomplishment, jobs, and busyness. Nothing man-made, however, can truly cover shame.

A curious feature of most of these walls is the way they allow us to see other people. The thick walls have small cracks or windows that allow us to see outside. We want to hide, but we also want to *spy*. On the one hand, spying may reveal the vulnerability of others so that we can believe that they are no different from us (or even not as good as us). Disgrace wants company. On the other hand, it may reveal someone who is strong and can be our hero. With heroes, we feel less isolated because we can enter into a safe fantasy relationship.

Fantasy is a popular pastime behind these walls. For example, Paula was a successful single woman. She had a great job with lots of responsibility and plenty of affirmation from her CEO. She was active in her church and well liked. But in the evenings, she lived with her fantasy husband and fantasy children. One reason she developed her fantasy world was because it gave her what she wanted. Another reason was that it gave her relationships without the risk of being known.

Fantasy has been part of my own world too, I confess. For example, I am relatively coordinated from the waist up, but my feet are useless. Too many years of swimming, I think. Coincidentally, my wife is coordinated all over, and she enjoys dancing.

Do you know what happened the last time we came home from a party? My mind began to roam; I began to fantasize that I had been a great dancer. In my fantasy of the past evening, I walked casually out onto the dance floor, just a regular guy, and all of a sudden I was a mashup of Fred Astaire, John Travolta, and Mick Jagger. People were amazed, my wife thought I was great . . .

Funny and pitiful. My point is that this relatively harmless fantasy was filled with fear of man. It was a way to manage what other people might think of my klutziness.

There is the paradox of self-esteem. I feel horrible about myself and worse than others, and I aspire to be impressive or better than others, at least in some small way. The reason I feel bad about myself is that I want a few minutes of greatness. I am a peasant who wants to be king. When we are in the grips of low self-worth or self-esteem, it's painful, and it certainly doesn't feel like pride. But our hearts are busy while we hide and spy.

Have you wondered why certain TV shows, magazines, and websites are so popular? Don't they offer us a brief opportunity to spy on others from behind our walls of shame? They let us see the disgrace of others, and that normalizes our own. Or they let us identify with our heroes so we can briefly feel better about ourselves.

It is as if the modern person is a peeping Tom. While he is looking at someone through a keyhole, he is being watched by another voyeur, who is being watched by another, who is being watched by another.

## **The Midnight Hour**

In the early 1800s, Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard observed people whose lives consisted of hiding and spying. Rather than walls, they used masks.

Do you not know that there comes a midnight hour when every one has to throw off his mask? Do you believe that life will always let itself be mocked? Do you think you can slip away a little before midnight to avoid this? Or are you not terrified by it? I have seen men in real life who so long deceived others that at last their true nature could not reveal itself; I have seen men who played hide and seek so long that at last in madness they disgustingly obtruded upon others their secret thoughts which hitherto they had proudly concealed.<sup>1</sup>

He is right. Every day is Halloween. Putting on our masks is a regular part of our morning rituals, just like brushing our teeth and eating breakfast. The masquerade, however, is anything but festive. Underneath the masks are people who are terrified that there will be an unveiling. And, indeed, the masks and other coverings will one day be removed in an eternal unveiling.

But it is not so much the eyes of other people that we ought to fear. After all, other people are no different from ourselves. Kierkegaard points to a deeper fear: the eyes of God. If the gaze of man

1. Soren Kierkegaard, "Either/Or," in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), 99.

awakens fear in us, how much more so the gaze of God. If we feel exposed by people, we will feel devastated before God.

To even think of such things is overwhelming. Our hearts tremble at the thought, and we do everything we can to avoid it. One way to avoid God’s eyes is to live as if fear of other people is our deepest problem—*they* are big, not God. This, of course, is not the case. Fear of people is often a more conscious version of fear of God—that is, we are more conscious of our fear of others than our fear of God.

Granted, fear of others *is* a real phenomenon. We really are afraid of the thoughts, opinions, and actions of other people. But under that we hide, as best we can, the more desperate fear of God. For example, notice the biblical version of Kierkegaard’s masquerade.

Turning to them Jesus said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’” (Luke 23:28–30)

When Christ returns, those who are naked would prefer being covered by the boulders of Jerusalem’s mountains to being exposed before the holy gaze of God.

## **God’s Answer and Our Response**

Of course, God has an answer to this fear. The gospel is the story of God’s covering his naked enemies, bringing them to the wedding feast, and then marrying them rather than crushing them. King David, who knew about this coming good news, said, “O LORD, you have searched me and known me!” (Ps. 139:1). God’s gaze—a curse



to those who are naked—was to him a blessing. His gaze protects those whose guilt he has atoned for and whose sins he has covered.

But what if fear lingers, even for those who have been covered with the righteousness of Jesus? The answer seems simple: Just remember what Jesus accomplished in his death, resurrection, and ascension. He has removed your shame. Other people no longer have the power to heap shame on you. Only your own sin leaves you unclean, and God forgives you when you confess your sin to him.

This *might* be the only liberating teaching that a fearful person needs. However, my personal experience suggests that there are many times when a solution must consist of more than a reminder of gospel truths.

I am not saying that the gospel of Jesus is not enough. What I mean is that we need to pay attention to the quiet waywardness of the human heart. We need not only to remember the gospel but to examine ourselves in its light and then act on what we know. For example, how does the “preeminence” (Col. 1:18) of Jesus affect our conversations? Are we confessing sins daily? Do we turn to God when life is overwhelming, or do we try to manage our world?

## **The Problem So Far**

Let’s summarize where we are now: The first view the Bible gives us of the fear of man is tied to shame and our effort to cover ourselves. We try to protect ourselves and avoid the gaze of others, and for good reason. But don’t miss the deeper problem. The problem *appears* to be the gaze of other people, but in reality the problem is within us and between God and ourselves. *Peer pressure* misses it—the ultimate problem is not the gaze of others but the gaze of God.

We classify the problem as “the fear of man” only because it is most obvious when we are in the presence of others. For example, if the high-school auditorium in the introduction had been empty

or the vice principal had told me that I had won an award over the phone, I would not have been embarrassed. The presence of others leaves us feeling exposed. However, even though it feels as if other people are causing us to feel shame, in reality we carry shame with us all the time. Other people simply trigger its appearance.

It’s no wonder that we can feel as though we are playing characters rather than living fully open lives. But there is a way forward. The answer to shame-induced fear of man lies in our relationship with God. *He* cleanses us; we cannot cleanse ourselves. Both our sin and shame lose their power when “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10).

There is much more that could be said. For now, it is enough to find words to identify what makes us susceptible to the fear of man. As you finish this chapter, consider your own tendencies to hide. Perhaps you can take hope in Scripture’s familiarity with the experience of shame—God has good and important things to say to you.

### **For Further Thought**

1. If you still have a hard time seeing the fear of other people in your life, consider any ways that your private life differs from your public one. Are there sins that you can easily confess to God but would find very difficult to share with another person? Are there things about yourself that you simply don’t want people to know? These questions may reveal some of the roots of shame-driven fear of man in your life.
2. Consider some of the strategies you use to cover yourself, and remember that most people wear multiple layers.