

FEAR OF GOD

Fearing **God means** having a reverence for Him that greatly impacts the way we live. The **Fear of God** is respecting Him, obeying Him, submitting to His discipline, and worshipping Him in awe.

You hear people explain the fear of the Lord as a mere respect or reverence. But the Bible uses the word *fear* at least 300 times in reference to God, so we make a mistake when we downplay it. The subject becomes even more mysterious when we read something like [1 John 4:18](#) that says that "perfect love expels all fear." So how do we marry this dichotomy? How can we fear God while he expels all fear?

Scripture is full of examples of how fearing God is a positive rather than a negative thing. For example in [Genesis 42:18](#), Joseph wins his brothers' trust when he declares he is a God-fearing man. It was because the midwives feared God that they obeyed him instead of the authorities by sparing the Hebrew babies ([Exodus 1:17](#)). Pharaoh brought disaster on his nation because he did not fear God ([Exodus 9:29-31](#)). Moses chose leaders to help him on the basis that they feared God and wouldn't take bribes ([Exodus 18:21](#)) and told the Hebrews that God met with them in a terrifying display of his power so that they wouldn't sin ([Exodus 20:20](#)).

The Mosaic Law cites fear of God as a reason to treat the disabled and elderly well ([Leviticus 19:14, 32](#)). And lest you think this is only an Old Testament idea, note that Jesus states this stronger than anyone when he says, "Don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell" ([Matthew 10:28](#)). And Paul says to work toward complete holiness because we fear God ([2 Corinthians 7:1](#)).

So it's clear from these passages, that fearing God is good because it saves us from caving into our own sinful nature. That's why hearing someone is God-fearing actually makes us trust that person more. If they fear God, they are more likely to keep their word and treat others with kindness. In fact, [Romans 3](#), a classic chapter on sin, says that our chief sin is that we "have no fear of God at all" ([Romans 3:18](#)).

So how does fear of God, who is perfect love, take away fear? William D. Eisenhower puts it this way in his article 'Fearing God' in *Christianity Today*:

Unfortunately, many of us presume that the world is the ultimate threat and that God's function is to offset it. How different this is from the biblical position that God is far scarier than the world When we assume that the world is the ultimate threat, we give it unwarranted power, for in truth, the world's threats are temporary. When we expect God to balance the stress of the world, we reduce Him to the world's equal As I walk with the Lord, I discover that God poses an ominous threat to my ego, but not to me. He rescues me from my delusions, so He may reveal the truth that sets me free. He casts me down, only to lift me up again. He sits in judgment of my sin, but forgives me nevertheless. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but love from the Lord is its completion.

And, of course, the ultimate example of fear and perfect love working together is Jesus Christ. He warned us at every turn to fear God, not men —and He confirmed that in everything about His life and death. He spoke lovingly but frankly to all and didn't mince words when people needed to face their sin and repent. But He also demonstrated love beyond human understanding when He lived out His words, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends ([John 15:13](#))." With love like that, what is left to fear but God?

The term “fear of God” or “fear of the Lord” features heavily throughout [the Bible](#). In both the Old and New Testaments, it is a fundamental virtue to fear [God](#). Many key figures in the Bible are praised for having such fear, and the Scriptures repeatedly tell us that the fear of the Lord is the foundation of wisdom, (Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 1:7, Job 28:28, etc.). Paul even says that fearing the Lord was a fundamental motivation for his gospel ministry, (2 Corinthians 5:11). Thus, it is inescapably true that we ought to fear God. But what exactly does it mean to *fear* Him?

The Fear of God is actual fear

The most important thing to clarify upfront is that the word “fear” is not figurative, misleading, or overstated. People today too often hold such a low view of God that they can't understand trembling in terror at His might and holiness. But that is *exactly* what the biblical authors had in mind! Perhaps the best example of this is in Deuteronomy, when Moses recounts what happened at Mount Sinai. God covered the mountain with flame and smoke and then spoke to all the people in an audible voice from the fire. Afterward, we read of the crowd's reaction:

“Behold, the Lord our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; we have seen today that God speaks with man, yet he lives. Now then why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, then we will die. For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? Go near and hear all that the Lord our God says; then speak to us all that the Lord our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do it,” (Deuteronomy 5:24-27)

These are not words of cool and lofty respect, but rather of genuine shaken-to-the-core fear! The people were literally afraid of God. And, as we read on, God commends them for it!

“The Lord heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the Lord said to me, ‘I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They have done well in all that they have spoken. Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!’” (Deuteronomy 5:28-29)

If only they could have maintained such fear, they would have remained faithful to God. This is the fear God *wants* from us!

Fearing God for who He is

It is also worth noting that, in the passage above, the Israelites were not afraid of anything that God Himself had threatened to *do*. Confronted with the undeniable presence of God, they trembled at the mere fact of hearing His voice! God is to be feared, not just because of what He might do (though His might and His holy judgments certainly ought to make us tremble), but, on an even more fundamental level, we ought to fear God because of who He is. The reality of the holy, almighty, eternal, transcendent one ought to strike us with terror as it did Israel. When we really grasp who God is, who among us could so much as hear the sound of His words and not cry out with Isaiah, “Woe to me, for I am ruined!” (Isaiah 6:5). As God said through Jeremiah:

“‘Do you not fear Me?’ declares the Lord. ‘Do you not tremble in My presence? For I have placed the sand as a boundary for the sea, An eternal decree, so it cannot cross over it. Though the waves toss, yet they cannot prevail; Though they roar, yet they cannot cross over it,’” (Jeremiah 5:22).

And even Nebuchadnezzar was made to confess:

“I make a decree that in all the dominion of my kingdom men are to fear and tremble before the God of Daniel; For He is the living God and enduring forever, And His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed, And His dominion will be forever,” (Daniel 6:26).

When we truly understand who we mean by “God,” His very nature ought to bring us fearfully to our knees!

The Fear of God and His wrath and judgment

Solomon, the wisest merely human king who ever lived, once wrote:

“The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil,” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

There is much we could say about this. Fearing God is literally essential to what it is to be human; it is the fundamental duty of every person! But the *reason* that Solomon offers for this fear is also telling. We fear the Lord *because* He will judge every deed. This sentiment is likewise echoed elsewhere, such as:

“My flesh trembles for fear of You, And I am afraid of Your judgments,” (Psalm 119:120).

This, too, is right and good. Even as a Christian who knows my ultimate eternity is secure, I still fear the correcting rod of my heavenly Father and King just as I feared the proper discipline of my earthly father when I was a child. I never once thought that my dad would disown me and cast me out of His house forever. I had assurance that I was his son and that he would always love me. But in that love, he would set me straight when I did wrong, and the correction was often swift and stern (justly and rightly so!). Fearing his discipline kept me on the right path, and I am grateful for it! How much more ought we to fear the just chastisement of the one who sees all and judges every deed!

Fear and courage

Lastly, we should see no conflict between the centrality of always fearing God in trembling terror on the one hand, and yet the presence of biblical commands to maintain bold courage on the other. Indeed, we cannot do one without the other! When we rightly fear God, we need not fear anyone else! Recognizing the Dreadful, Holy Might of the Lord drives out fear of any meager thing that might oppose Him.

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8:31).

Faced with powerful enemies and natural barriers to entering the promised land, Joshua was assured:

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go,” (Joshua 1:9).

Yet, as he led the people in, Joshua said without contradiction:

“For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the Lord your God had done to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed; that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, so that you may fear the Lord your God forever,” (Joshua 4:23-34).

They were to fear God, not just then, but forever. Not just that one generation, but all generations after them. Yet, fearing God, they need not fear the waters of the Jordan nor the weapons and walls of the Canaanites. Having an abiding fear of God, we are free to face everything else with boldness and strength. The fear of the Lord really is the foundation for wisdom, virtue, and valor. If you have a view of God so vast that He scares you, everything else falls into place!

The Fear of God

Seven Attributes

What does the Bible mean when it mentions fearing God or the fear of God? It's an extensive subject, one that is mentioned more than 300 times in Scripture.

As we know, fear can be either a positive or a negative emotion. A healthy fear will keep us out of trouble and danger. This is especially so with a cautious and holy awe and reverence toward God. Yet there is also a cowardly type of fear that holds people back in the wrong way, which the Bible condemns. Both kinds are found abundantly in God's Word. And it's vital to know the difference between the two kinds of fear and to develop the right kind while avoiding the wrong.

An example of the wrong kind of fear

We have a biblical example of the wrong kind of fear when, as the Israelites were on the verge of entering the Promised Land, 10 of the 12 spies sent in brought back a pessimistic report. Their report was so discouraging that the people became filled with fear and discouragement to the point that they were ready to rebel against Moses and return to Egypt!

The account is found in Numbers 14:1-4: “So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, ‘If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why has the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?’”

Because of the negative report, the people were ready to quit, return to Egypt, and again become slaves. Remember, this was the generation that had recently witnessed the mighty miracles of the plagues on Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea. They had been led by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night and had witnessed the awesome display of power at Mount Sinai. They were being miraculously fed and sustained in the wilderness! But when faithless fear gripped their hearts, they forgot about God’s presence and promises and wanted to give up.

The right kind of fear which Joshua and Caleb had

On the other hand, two of the spies had the right kind of fear— Joshua and Caleb. This is the type of fear that deeply respects God and His promises.

They told the congregation: “The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, ‘a land which flows with milk and honey.’ Only do not rebel against the Lord, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the Lord is with us. Do not fear them” (Numbers 14:6-9).

God would reward the living faith of these two young men. While all the rest of that generation were not allowed to enter the Promised Land, Joshua and Caleb were able to go in because they had “a different spirit,” meaning the right attitude of trusting in God (Numbers 14:24; Numbers 14:38).

So it’s very important to distinguish *godly* fear from the cringing and paralyzing fear that abandons faith. In fact, God says that if we allow

cowardly and faithless fear to dominate us, the kind of fear that makes us shirk from godly duty and responsibility, we simply won't be in His Kingdom.

As God said, "But those who are *full of fear* and *without faith*, the unclean and takers of life, those who do the sins of the flesh, and those who make use of evil powers or who give worship to images, and all those who are false, will have their part in the sea of ever-burning fire which is *the second death*" (Revelation 21:8)

The primary words translated "fear" in the Bible

Two main words in the Bible describe fear, whether good or bad. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *yirah* is most often translated "fear." In the New Testament, it is the Greek word *phobos*, from which we get the English word *phobia*—an extreme or unreasonable fear of something in particular.

The biblical King David, who had a way with words, wrote a lot about the fear of God. He used the word *yirah* once to describe a normal fear of being persecuted. He said, "*Fearfulness* and trembling have come upon me, and horror has overwhelmed me" (Psalms 55:5). However, the majority of times he used the word *yirah*, he meant it as a positive fear of God that included deep reverence for Him and His Word.

For instance, he exclaimed: "Blessed is the man who *fears the Lord*, who delights greatly in His commandments. His descendants will be mighty on earth; the generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches will be in his house, and his righteousness endures forever" (Psalms 112:1-3).

With this background, let's look at seven attributes of godly fear in the Bible.

1. The Fear of God is a gift from Him

Genuine Fear of God accompanies real conversion and comes from yielding to Him and receiving His Spirit. Notice how Isaiah 11:1-3 describes some of the qualities of the Messiah, Jesus Christ:

"There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, *the Spirit of knowledge and of the Fear of the Lord*. His delight is in the Fear of the Lord, and He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears . . ."

The apostle Paul also shows that God is involved in our having a proper fear and respect of Him while we do our part in this. As Paul points out, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*; for it is God who works in you both *to will and to do* for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13).

2. The Fear of God produces godly humility

When someone truly fears God, it makes the person yield to Him—no matter what. This person is in awe and properly trembles before God and His Word—for it’s not a passing thought. As David wrote, “Let all the earth *fear the Lord*; let all the inhabitants of the world *stand in awe* of Him” (Psalms 33:8).

Through the prophet Isaiah, God showed He desires this kind of attitude from us: “But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit [that is, humbly repentant], and *who trembles* at My word” (Isaiah 66:2).

We see this in Noah, who showed a respectful fear of God when he received the daunting instructions to build a huge ark. As Hebrews 11:7 tells us, “By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, *moved with godly fear*, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is *according to faith*.”

Proverbs 22:4 points out the blessings that result from this type of reverential attitude toward God: “By *humility* and *the fear of the Lord* are riches and honor and life.”

This kind of fear recognizes how small we are before the infinite majesty of God and keeps us from thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to. It further helps us to be considerate and not haughty toward others, especially when speaking about our faith and beliefs. As Peter explains, “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, *with meekness and fear*” (1 Peter 3:15).

3. The Fear of God instills obedience

The Fear of God creates a deep desire to obey and please Him above all things, not wanting to disappoint Him and also taking into consideration having

to give an account of ourselves before Him. So godly fear is more than mere respect for God. It goes far deeper, acknowledging there is a reckoning that will take place.

As Paul wrote: “Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, *to be well pleasing to Him*. For we must *all appear before the judgment seat of Christ*, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, *the terror* [or fear, the Greek word *phobos* used here] *of the Lord*, we persuade men . . .” (2 Corinthians 5:9-11).

David understood the connection between the Fear of God and obedience when he wrote, “The *Fear of the Lord* is the *beginning* of wisdom; a good *understanding* have all those who *do His commandments*” (Psalms 111:10). This obedience and reverence toward God also made David want to fellowship with others who had this same godly fear. He declared, “I am a companion of *all who fear You*, and of those who *keep Your precepts*” (Psalms 119:63).

This Fear of God led David to dedicate one of the Psalms to obeying the Fourth Commandment—to rest on and honor the Sabbath day. Notice the superscription at the beginning of Psalm 92 followed by the first verse: “A *Song for the Sabbath Day*. It is good to give thanks to the Lord, and to sing praises to Your name, O Most High.”

And note what the *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* states about this verse: “The Sabbath is the day that God has hallowed, and that is to be consecrated to God by our turning away from the business pursuits of the working days . . . and applying ourselves to the praise and adoration of God, which is the most proper, blessed Sabbath employment. It is good, *i.e.*, not merely good in the eyes of God, but also good for man, beneficial to the heart, pleasant and blessed.”

God’s way of life can be summed up by this verse: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: *Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all*” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

4. The Fear of God develops godly courage

Another attribute that the Fear of God produces is godly courage.

David again expressed it well: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; *whom shall I fear? The Lord* is the *strength* of my life; *of whom shall I be afraid?* . . . Though an army may encamp against me, *my heart shall not fear*; though war may rise against me, *in this I will be confident*” (Psalms 27:1-3).

When you fear God more than man, then you will fear man less than God. We see an example of this when the apostles went before the powerful Jewish leaders and were threatened with violence if they

continued preaching about Jesus. Peter and the other apostles responded, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). They then received a beating and were told to cease speaking in the name of Jesus, but they didn’t back down—they continued to do the right thing before God!

Paul also encouraged his young fellow minister Timothy to have godly courage and to avoid cowardly fear. Paul exhorted him: “Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands [this being the means to conferring God’s Spirit and authorization to spiritual office]. For God has *not* given us a *spirit of fear*, but of *power* and of *love* and of a *sound mind*” (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

5. The Fear of God helps us avoid sin

Another quality that accompanies godly fear is the shunning of sin and following God’s way of righteousness.

As Proverbs 8:13 tells us, “The *Fear of the Lord* is to *hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way* and the perverse mouth I hate” (Proverbs 8:13). Proverbs 16:6 later adds, “In mercy and truth atonement is provided for iniquity [lawlessness]; and by *the Fear of the Lord* one departs from *evil*.”

Paul admonished the Christians in Corinth when he wrote, “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us *cleanse ourselves* from *all filthiness* of the flesh and spirit, *perfecting holiness in the Fear of God*” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

We should strive for and never lose that godly fear that causes us to flee from sin and its deadly consequences!

6. The Fear of God builds and encourages godly leadership

One of the requirements to serve God is to rightly fear Him. Moses, following the wise advice of his father-in-law, set up leaders with the following qualities: “able men, such as *fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness*” (Exodus 18:21).

Jehoshaphat, one of the righteous kings of Judah, did the same. “He set judges in the land throughout all the fortified cities of Judah, city by city, and said to the judges, ‘Take heed to what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the Lord, Who is with you in the judgment. Now therefore, *let the Fear of the Lord be upon you; take care and do it*, for

there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, no partiality, nor taking of bribes' . . . And he commanded them, saying, 'Thus you shall act *in the Fear of the Lord*, faithfully and with a loyal heart'" (2 Chronicles 19:5-9).

Those who possess godly fear will resist the urge to take advantage of others by abusing their positions of authority. The Jewish ruler Nehemiah recorded an excellent example of this when he wrote: "But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, *but I did not do so, because of the Fear of God*" (Nehemiah 5:15).

On the other hand, there is a wrong type of fear that is not appropriate for leadership. We see this when God told the Israelites through Moses: "The officers shall speak further to the people, and say, 'What man is there *who is fearful and fainthearted*? Let him *go and return to his house*, lest the heart of his brethren *faint like his heart*'" (Deuteronomy 20:8). We see here that those who lack faith and are faint-hearted can discourage others and create instability, which indicates they are not fit to lead God's people.

7. The Fear of God leads to loving God and those like-minded

The early Church was characterized by godly fear and love that led to an affectionate fellowship among the brethren. As Acts 9:31 describes: "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria *had peace and were edified. And walking in the Fear of the Lord* and in the *comfort* of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied."

So the Fear of God must grow into the Love of God in us and toward other Christians. The apostle John showed we should avoid having cowardly and paralyzing fear and worry, and that we should instead have confidence in God's love toward us and of our love toward God and to those who truly fear Him.

As John wrote: "And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have *boldness* in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is *no fear in love*; but *perfect love casts out fear*, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:16-19). We see here that godly fear and love expel the wrong type of fear.

In sum, may we all develop that vital and proper Fear of God that leads to loving Him and others and avoid cowardly fear by putting God first in our lives. This is what the Bible means in telling us to have the Fear of God!