

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

By Rebecca S. May

- *How should we understand the concept of fear?*
- *What does the Bible say that we should and should not fear?*
- *Is it possible to love and fear the same thing?*
- *Is it possible to learn to fear God?*

Whether by example or command, the words “fear God” appear more than 180 times in the Bible.

Defining Fear

The most common Old Testament word for “fear,” is the Hebrew word *yare*. Some English translations use words such as awesome, revere, and terrible instead of fear; but the word *yare* always means “to fear.” The most common New Testament word for “fear” is the Greek word *phobos*, which first had the meaning of “light,” that which is caused by being scared; then, “that which may cause flight: fear, dread, or terror” (*Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, pp. 229-30).

Webster defines “fear” as an unpleasant, often strong, emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger. Fear implies anxiety and usually loss of courage (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, p. 453).

Understanding Fear

The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (EDT) claims that fright or terror has no place in the Christian’s life, at least in his relationship to God (p. 409). While the fear of God does command a respect of God, in disagreement with the EDT quote, there is an amount of fright within the scope of understanding fear.

Whether you are reading in the Old Testament or the New Testament, the fear of God means exactly that, fear. It is a crippling force which humbles when you experience it. It causes you to awe, dread, and revere its capabilities.

The fear of God is clearly commanded in the Bible, and it also makes perfect sense to fear God. For example, we might fear things we don’t know about or understand, like flying. There are many aspects of God (that He is eternal, for example--Psalm 90:2) which we cannot understand. What we need to know now about God is sufficiently contained in Scripture. Yet there are things we don’t know about Him. *Behold, God is exalted, and we do not know Him* (Job. 36:26). *He thunders with His voice wondrously, doing great things which we cannot comprehend* (Job 37:5).

OR

We might fear things we can't see, like darkness. We cannot see God. While He always sees us and is everywhere present (Psalm 139:7-12), we will not be able to see Him until after we die (2 Corinthians 5:8).

OR

We might fear things, like snakes, which can do us harm. God could also do us harm if He wanted to. When Paul was addressing the Gentile believers in Rome (Romans 11:20-21), he warns them not to be arrogant in relation to the Jews who had been rejected by Christ. Paul uses branches on a tree to illustrate the positions of both Jews and Gentiles before God. ... *they [Jews] were broken off for their unbelief, but you [Gentiles] stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches (Jews), neither will He spare you [Gentiles]. If God set aside Israel for their unbelief, He could do the same to Gentiles for their pride; therefore fear God* (Ryrie NASB Study Bible, p. 1807).

It is a fact that God could do us harm in any way He chooses. That certainly does not mean He will. But to say He definitely won't or can't, denies the fact that He is God, our sovereign ruler, who is free to use the power He has over us as our Creator any way He chooses.

1 John 4:18 says, *there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.* Many have quoted this verse to say that when the Bible commands us to fear God, it does not actually mean fear, as we have defined it here, because then we wouldn't be able to love God, since there is no fear in love. There are some problems with this argument. First, the context surrounding 1 John 4:18 is love casting out the fear of condemnation, not the fear of God in general. Second, if fear doesn't actually mean fear but rather something like respect, then this verse would be saying, perfect love casts out respect. It seems clear that fear here means fear.

Biblical Fear

In Isaiah 8:9-15, the Lord spoke to Isaiah saying, *you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it. It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, And He shall be your dread.* Fear in this passage does not mean something as simple as mere respect. The word dread implies a great and paralyzing fear, aroused by the terrible, such as the dread of death.

The New Testament supports this concept of the fear of God. Matthew 10:28 says, *And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.* Looking at the context of this verse, we can see that Matthew 10 contains instructions from Jesus to His chosen disciples. The immediate context in verse 16 says, *Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.* Jesus then gives them a warning in verse 17 *beware of men, because they will be hated (v. 22), persecuted (v. 23), and false accusations will be made about them (v. 25), just as they have been made about Christ.* But, He continues, don't be anxious (v. 19), and don't fear them, for they merely have the power to kill the body (v. 28). But rather, fear God. Why? Because God has the power, *to destroy both soul and body.* And you need not fear men because in fearing God you are fearing the One who knows the number of hairs on you head and who watches the sparrows (v. 29-31), who are nothing compared to how He cares and watches out for you.

Why Fear

The primary reason we should fear God is because we are commanded to. Yet there is a logical reason why God wants us to fear Him. Fear inspires obedience. *And by the fear of the LORD one keeps away from evil* (Proverbs 16:6, see also Exodus 20:20). The Lord commanded Israel, *You shall not fear other gods, nor bow down yourselves to them nor serve them nor sacrifice to them. But the LORD, who brought you up from the land of Egypt with great power and with an outstretched arm, Him you shall fear, and to Him you shall bow yourselves down, and to Him you shall sacrifice* (2 Kings 17:35-36). It is when we do not live in the fear of the Lord that our hearts envy sinners (Proverbs 23:17), which is why Solomon says, after extensively evaluating life, *the conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person* (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Psalms and Proverbs speak of many wonderful things associated with being afraid of God: prolonged life (Proverbs 10:27), goodness (Psalm 31:19), compassion (Psalm 103:13), praise (Proverbs 31:30), favor (Psalm 147:11), and blessing (Psalm 111:5; 112:1; 128:4).

What Not to Fear

If we are afraid of God, that is, we fear violating both His spiritual and physical laws, we have nothing else to fear. We should not fear death (Hebrews 2:14-15), our enemies (Numbers 14:9), other gods, (2 Kings 17:7), evil (Psalm 23:4), men (Deuteronomy 1:17), the words of men (Ezekiel 2:6), or what men fear (Isaiah 54:14). We need not fear oppression (Isaiah 54:14), disaster (Zephaniah 3:15), suffering (Revelation 2:10), or intimidation (1 Peter 3:14).

The Bible also says that we should not fear the government, unless we break the law; then we will fear because God has placed them in authority over us (Romans 13:3-7). In the same way, children should fear their parents because fear involves punishment (1 John 4:18). Fear is the proper response in any biblically commanded submission relationship. *Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ* (Ephesians 6:5).

Learning to Fear God

If you are just now coming to understand what it means to fear God and are convicted you are not afraid of God, it is not too late. Fearing God is a righteous and mature decision which can be both learned and discerned.

When the sons of Israel reached Mt. Sinai, in the third month after they had gone out of the land of Egypt, God said to Moses, *Assemble the people to me that I may let them hear My words so they may learn to fear me all the days they live on the earth and that they may teach their children* (Deuteronomy 4:10). If our goal is to learn to fear God, the first step is to hear His words, which, for us, means studying the Bible, since these are the only words from God which we have today. Solomon says in Proverbs 2:1-5,

IF you:

- 1. will receive my sayings, And**
 - 2. treasure my commandments within you,**
 - 3. Make your ear attentive to wisdom,**
 - 4. Incline your heart to understanding; For if you**
 - 5. cry for discernment,**
 - 6. Lift your voice for understanding; If you**
 - 7. seek her as silver, And**
 - 8. search for her as for hidden treasures;**
- THEN you will discern the fear of the LORD, And discover the knowledge of God.**

Consider the attributes the Bible associates with being afraid of God. Those who feared God were people of knowledge (Isaiah 11:2), of sound wisdom (Micah 6:9). They were upright (Proverbs 14:2; Job 1:8), with sincerity of heart (Colossians 3:22). They were clean (Psalm 19:9), bond-servants of Christ (Revelation 19:5), able (Exodus 18:21), and blameless (Job 1:1). They hated evil (Proverbs 8:13), walked in His ways (Deuteronomy 8:6) and served Him (Joshua 24:14). They feared God.

Questions and Answers

Q: *How should we understand the concept of fear?*

A: Fear means just that, fear. It is a humbling emotion which causes fright and inspires obedience.

Q: *What does the Bible say that we should and should not fear?*

A: The Bible says that we should fear God always (Proverbs 23:17; Jeremiah 32:38-39). There is no other justifiable fear.

Q: *Is it possible to love and fear the same thing?*

A: Yes, not only is it possible, it's commanded (Deuteronomy 6:5; Isaiah 8:13).

Q: *Is it possible to learn to fear God?*

A: Yes, the Israelites were instructed to do it (Deuteronomy 4:10).