



# Should We Fear God?

Brad Jersak

*“In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence.”—King Solomon*

**W**hat is “the Fear of the Lord”? From a gospel standpoint, in light of Jesus’ resurrection victory, his words echo in our ears: “Be not afraid” (John 6:20 KJV). The good news of Jesus demonstrates Christ’s unwavering opposition to all forms of fear. Indeed, our experience of fear is almost always rooted in lies we’ve come to believe or mistrust in the love of our heavenly Father. The New Testament frames “the fearful” as those bound up in chains, in desperate need of freedom.

This begs the question: What about “the fear of the Lord,” a phrase that appears about thirty times in the King James Version of the Bible? Aren’t we commanded to “fear the Lord”?

In his collection of proverbs, King Solomon treated the fear of the Lord as an essential virtue, required by God of his wise and faithful servants: *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding”* (Proverbs 9:10).

But why would the same God, incarnated in Jesus, say “It is I; be not afraid” (John 6:20, KJV) also command us to fear him?

After all, John the Beloved wrote

that there is “no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear: because fear has to do with punishment” (1 John 4:18). So then, where does this leave room for the *fear of the Lord*? It sounds like a double-bind. We’d best sort out what God means.

## More Than a Feeling

Simple interpretive guidelines will help clarify the biblical definition of the *fear of the Lord*. First, we need to stop treating the fear of the Lord as merely an emotion. The norm in Scripture is that it is less about feeling scared and instead, treated as a *way of life*. As long as we falsely equate and reduce this “fear” to a feeling, we forever wrestle over when and whether we should be afraid of God. Either that or we choose other less offensive feelings (like reverential awe) or attitudes (like respect) to explain this puzzling phrase. That’s a first step in the right direction, but still centered in an emotional experience.

But just as “discouraged” in Scripture can be a verb, meaning, “to give up” rather than an emotional label (to feel despondent), so it is with the fear of the Lord. Instead of representing an emotion like terror, the fear of the Lord is really an action word, the meaning of which becomes clear by applying the second interpretive principle.

## Hebrew Parallelism

This second principle is the basic poetic device called “Hebrew parallelism.” Briefly, Hebrew parallelism uses two parallel phrases. The second phrase will define, clarify, exemplify, expand, or contrast the meaning of an initial phrase. The second phrase makes the meaning of the initial phrase clear. Thus, by using parallels synonymous with “the fear of the Lord,” the Hebrew prophets and poets define it for us, as demonstrated below (using the NKJV to retain “fear” lingo but updating the grammar):

**1) Most often the fear of the Lord simply means OBEYING God diligently.**

*Now this is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the Lord your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them in the land which you are crossing over to possess, that you may fear the Lord your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged.* (Deuteronomy 6:1-2, my emphasis)

*Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Who is the man who desires life, and*

loves many days, that he may see good?

**Keep your tongue from evil,  
And your lips from speaking deceit.  
Depart from evil and do good;  
Seek peace and pursue it.**

(Psalm 34:11-14, my emphasis)

**2) The fear of the Lord includes SERVING God faithfully.**

*“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to **fear the Lord** your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to **serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul**, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?*

(Deuteronomy 10:12-13, my emphasis)

*If you fear the Lord and serve Him and obey His voice, and do not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then both you and the king who reigns over you will continue following the Lord your God.*

(1 Samuel 12:14, my emphasis)

**3) The fear of the Lord also includes WORSHIPING God exclusively.**

*For the Lord is great and greatly to be praised;  
He is **to be feared** above all gods.  
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,  
But the Lord made the heavens.  
Honor and majesty are before Him;  
Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.  
Give to the Lord, O families of the peoples,  
Give to the Lord glory and strength.  
**Give to the Lord the glory due His name;  
Bring an offering, and come into His courts.  
Oh, worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!  
Fear before Him, all the earth.***

(Psalm 96:4-9, my emphasis)

**4) The fear of the Lord means TRUSTING God completely.**

*Oh, how great is Your goodness,  
Which You have laid up for **those who fear You**,  
Which You have prepared for **those who trust in You**  
In the presence of the sons of men!*

(Psalm 31:19, my emphasis)

*You who **fear the Lord, trust in the Lord**; He is their help and their shield. (Psalm 115:11, my emphasis)*

*He has put a new song in my mouth—Praise to our God;  
Many will see **it and fear**,  
And will trust in the Lord.*

(Psalm 40:3, my emphasis)

***In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence**, and His children will have a place of refuge. **The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life**, to turn one away from the snares of death. (Proverbs 14:26-27, my emphasis)*

**5) The fear of the Lord means we serve NO OTHER GODS.**

*Now therefore, **fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods** which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. **Serve the Lord!** And if it seems evil to you to **serve the Lord**, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, **whether the gods** which your fathers served that were on the other side of the river, **or the gods** of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, **we will serve the Lord.** (Joshua 24:14-15, my emphasis)*

### **When God Seems Scary**

To be fair, some Bible authors do use the phrase “*fear of the Lord*” to denote a terrifying experience of the Almighty (Isaiah 2:19, 19:16, Jeremiah 5:22), or an awesome encounter with his glory that resulted in reverence (Psalm 33:8). Consider Isaiah’s reaction when he encountered God face-to-face:

***Woe is me, for I am undone!** Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; **For my eyes have seen the King**, the Lord of hosts. (Isaiah 6:5, my emphasis)*

I do not deny such experiences. Yet gratefully, when such traumatic encounters with the Lord occur in the Bible, notice that from Genesis (26:24) to Revelation (1:17), God consistently answers with a word of comfort, “*Fear not!*”

God is not looking to evoke dread in his people. Rather, **Fear of the Lord** is described in the Bible as a lifestyle of obedience, service, worship, and trust in the only God who says, “*There’s no need to be afraid. My love is perfect and will free you from fear.*”

Today and every day, Christ himself invites us to *come quickly, knock loudly, and enter boldly*. And even to those who come in the trepidation of their shame, he says again right now, “*It is I; be not afraid*” (John 6:20 KJV). □

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