



WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE CHRISTIAN TO FEAR GOD?

Source: John Piper, Desiring God

(<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-does-it-mean-for-the-christian-to-fear-god>)



Questions: "Can you please explain the fear of God? I have heard different definitions of what this means to fear God as a believer."

I would say this is a very important topic. It is not marginal. It is all over the Bible. The fear of the Lord is a pervasive and important topic, and I think it is needed today, because we are so quick, I think, to solve the problem of God's fearsomeness with the gospel that we may not give people a chance to really let them sink in how deeply sinful they are or how fearful God really is. The Old Testament, of course – everybody would think of the Old Testament, I suppose, as strewn with commands to fear the Lord and warnings of the terrible things that will come if we don't and the blessings that come if we do.

Fear in the Old Testament

Proverbs 28:14: "Blessed is the one who fears the Lord always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity." So fearing God is contrasted with a hard, unperceptive heart.

Or Isaiah 66:2: "This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." So again, fearing is corresponding with humility and lowliness and sensitivity of heart. The sheer majesty of God, as well as the holiness, and justice, and power, and wrath of God, cannot be approached in a cavalier spirit. It would be insane to think we can just stroll up to the Creator of the universe and have a cavalier spirit. We are blind if we think we can do that without trembling.

Fear in the New Testament

Now, is that just for the Old Testament? What does the New Testament say? Philippians 2:12-13: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you." This is really interesting. You should fear and tremble because God is working to keep you. And I think it means the sheer awesome presence of God in our lives working for us, not against us, should



produce trembling. That is amazing. So, the New Testament treats the fear of God as a motive for not turning away from him. We should fear in the sense that we seek refuge from God away from God's terrible wrath. God's grace in Christ is the refuge from God's wrath outside Christ. There is terror outside of Christ, and there is a different kind of trembling inside of Christ.

So, for example, Hebrews 12:25, 28: "See that you don't refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. . . . Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken." That is security. "And thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29; see also Deuteronomy 4:24). In other words, the same thing is there: We are safe. We have a kingdom that cannot be shaken. But our God is a consuming fire. You don't come near him without reverence and awe.

So, Romans 11:19-21 shows how you not only experience the fear of God as a right way of worshiping him in reverence and awe, but you experience the fear of God as an incentive not to run away from him. So, it says in Romans 11:19, "You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.'" In other words, Jews were rejected so that I, a Gentile, could be grafted into the Abrahamic covenant. Verse 20: "That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear." So he is commanding believers who are standing fast in faith to fear. Fear what? Fear the prospect of becoming proud, and arrogant, and self-sufficient, and drifting away from the living God in a kind of hard-heartedness.

So fear functions as a preservative. We don't want to run away from God. Don't be presumptuous. So there is that aspect of fearing God.

Not Every Fear

We want to be rid of some aspects of fearing God, and we don't want to be rid of some aspects of fearing God. So 1 John describes the kind we want to be done with. 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love." So, God doesn't want us to cower like slaves in the household where the children should be enjoying sweet peace in their Father's care. So if we can get to the point of perfect love, we wouldn't fear God's rejection of us. We would be really content in his acceptance. So we can be done – we should be done – with a cowering fear that we might not be saved and enjoy our care and our security in his house.

But the other aspect of fear is what we should keep and enjoy. Yes – enjoy. Nehemiah 1:11: "O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name." Delight to fear your name. Delight to fear your name. So there is a kind of fear that is not repulsive. It doesn't drive us away. It draws us in.

Or here is Isaiah 11:2-3, about the Lord Jesus: "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 the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord." Jesus enjoyed fearing God.

Don't Run from Fear

Now here are two pictures, and I will close. I went to visit a man named Dick Teegan, with Karsten when he was six. He had a dog at the door when we opened the door, and he looked Karsten eyeball to eyeball. This is a giant dog. And I sent Karsten back to the car to grab something that we had forgotten, and the dog went loping up behind the six-year-old at his very height with a little low growl, and Karsten was terrified. And Dick leaned out the door and shouted to Karsten, my six-year-old, "Karsten, maybe you better not run. He doesn't like it when people run away from him."



And I thought, "That is going in the sermon this Sunday." Just walk beside him. You can even put your hand around his neck, you know? God is horrifically dangerous to run away from, and we should be terrified to run away from God, but if we will stay with him, his growl is a growl of our protection, not our destruction. And we can put our arm around his big neck, I guess, to change the imagery.

Or here is one last image, and I love this one, because I love the picture of a big, holy, sovereign, majestic God. So I picture myself climbing in the mountains, say the Himalayas. And I'm on these massive rock faces, and I see a storm coming. It is going to be a massive storm, and I feel unbelievably vulnerable on these mountain precipices. And so, I am desperately looking for a little covert in the rock where I won't be blown off the side of the cliff to destruction.

And I find a hole in the side of the mountain, and I spin quickly, and suddenly the holiness, and justice, and power, and wrath, and judgment of God breaks over me like a hurricane, but I know I am totally safe, which means all that horrible danger is transposed into the music of majesty, and I can enjoy it rather than fearing it. And I think that is what the cross is. Jesus died for us to provide a place where we could enjoy the majesty of God with a kind of fear and trembling and reverence and awe, but not a cowering fear.