

# FROM ABOVE | The Beginning of Wisdom

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## REVIEW

In James 3, we see that there is a kind of wisdom from below that is unspiritual, earthly, and even demonic. In the world we're living in, we desperately need some wisdom from above.

*Our goal in this series is to grow in wisdom together so that we might be able address the difficulties and complexities of life in a way that honors God and blesses others.*

Today, we're going to be talking about a phrase that may be one of the most important, misunderstood, and crucial ideas as it relates to wisdom—**the fear of the Lord**.

### Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

**THE PARADOX**  
**THE PROBLEM**  
**THE POWER**

## THE PARADOX

The Bible uses the word *fear* at least 300 times in reference to God, which if you're new to the Christian faith or are exploring Christianity, can be slightly confusing. Some examples:

- **1 John 4:18** says that God Who is love expels all fear: "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."
- **Proverbs 28:14** says, "Happy is the man who is always reverent (who fears the Lord always), but he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity."
- **Proverbs 14:26–27** say, "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."
- Moses, speaking to the Israelites at Sinai says, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." (**Exodus 20:20**)

You read these verses and think,

- How can someone who is always afraid be blessed, happy, and joyful?
- How can fear be a fountain of life? How can fear give you confidence?
- How can we "not fear" if we're "fearing God?"

**Personal**—Before I was a follower of Jesus, I was walking between classes in college and there was a man making this dramatic scene in the middle of the main square, shouting at people and getting in people's faces. As I got closer I could see a sign that read, "God is angry!" This guy was shouting that we were all going to hell because we lived in co-ed dorms, and used public restrooms. He actually said, "You're going to hell because you share toilet seats with one another!"

I'm still not sure where this guy got his theology, but I didn't walk away from that interaction thinking, "Wow, that seems reasonable. I want to be a part of that!" I walked away thinking, "If God is anything like that, I don't want to have anything to do with Him."

There are many Christians who have a view of God as this angry, controlling, overbearing taskmaster looking for groveling servitude and waiting to pounce whenever they sin or make a mistake.

But many others of you know that the fear of the Lord doesn't mean being afraid of something bad. **The fear of the Lord is the fear that rises up in us in the presence of something incredibly good.**

### **EXAMPLE—**

#### **Luke 5:1–8**

So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret, and saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing their nets. Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat.

When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, “**Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.**”

But Simon answered and said to Him, “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.” And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”

After Peter and his friends had fished all night and caught nothing, Jesus came along and told them to throw their nets out one more time, and they did it and caught so many fish the boats began to sink. That's when Peter realized he was in the presence of **someone of absolute goodness, someone Holy, someone pure**, and he fell at Jesus's knees. Why? In the presence of someone pure, holy, powerful, and beautiful, Peter came face to face with his own sinfulness, and this created a reverent fear in him. It exposed him and revealed something he rather would have ignored.

**In the presence of Someone pure,  
we come face to face with our own impurity.  
In the presence of Someone holy,  
our ungodliness is revealed.**

The fear of the Lord isn't being afraid of God because you believe He's going to do something harmful to you, even though He is all powerful, absolutely just, and one day will bring His wrath on anyone and anything that is in opposition to Him.

**The fear of the Lord is reverent respect, awe, and adoration.**

Zacharias Ursinus, a collaborator of Martin Luther, clarified it by contrasting **servile fear with filial fear**<sup>1</sup>:

- **Servile fear** is the kind of fear that a prisoner has for his jailer or executioner. This is the whimpering, cowering dread that comes over you in the presence of that sort of person.
- **Filial fear** is a type of respect and overwhelming adoration. It is the love a child has for a parent. It is awe, reverence, and a desire to please the one you most adore in life.

Those who don't belong to God ought to have a servile fear of God, not because God hates them, but because God hates sin and what sin does, and there will be judgment someday.

But God desires that no one should perish. This is why Jesus came! This is the freedom Jesus offers. When you surrender your life to God, you become His child, and you replace servile fear with filial fear.

Author and pastor John Bevere said it like this, “**If you're scared of God, you have something to hide. If you fear God, you have nothing to hide.**”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Heidelberg Catechism* (1563)

<sup>2</sup> Bevere, John. *The Fear of the Lord*. N.p.: Charisma House, 2006.

In other words, if you fear God, you know that everything is laid bare before Him already. He knows it all, and as His child, you can come before Him with all of your imperfections, frailties, and grievous sins, and lay them before Him and know that **He is for you**.

God is not after groveling servitude—that's not the kind of relationship God wants with us. He wants intimacy and friendship, and when we have that with God, we'll revere Him. **We will be in awe of the One who has the power to create worlds with a single word, and Who also desires friendship, relationship, and intimacy with us.**

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## THE PROBLEM

**Problem**—You're the one who determines the level of intimacy you have with God. Many faithful, church-attending Christians are content to have a surface-level, semi-obedient, distant relationship with God.

One of the primary reasons for this in the American Church is that we don't actually fear God.

**We fear men.**

**To fear God means to know He is your true north,  
He is the filter through which you make every decision,  
He is your priority,  
and your desire is to please Him above all.**

**The fear of man**—When we fear man, it may seem like we're putting other people in God's rightful position, but we're really putting ourselves in God's rightful position and using the opinions of others to keep us there.

- **Jeremiah 17:5–6**

Thus says the LORD: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD. For he shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when good comes, but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land which is not inhabited.

- We who trust in man—who prioritize the opinions of people over the pleasure of God—are never satisfied. Whatever good comes into our lives is never enough, and we don't recognize it when it does come.
- When we operate in the fear of man, we oscillate between two sinful extremes: **on one side, we fall into the sin of pride and self-righteousness:**
  - If people think highly of us, we think, "*Well, of course! I'm pretty awesome. Look at all I've accomplished. Of course they think highly of me. Why wouldn't they?*"
  - If people think lowly of us, we think, "*How dare they say those things about me!*"
  - No matter how much affirmation we get, it's never enough. When we fear man, we demand everything revolve around us—our needs, our wants, and our desires—all in order to exalt US.
- **On the other extreme, we fall into the sin of self-pity:**
  - If people think lowly of us, we say, "*They're right, I'm a terrible person, and I'll always be a failure. I'll never change, so there's no point in even trying.*"
  - If we do receive affirmation, we dismiss it as false and irrelevant. But even in this case, we're still the center of our own lives. We're still basing our lives on the opinions of people.

## Proverbs 29:25

The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe.

- The fear of man traps us in an endless oscillation between self-righteousness and self-pity.
- The fear of man makes us incapable of being wise because every decision we make is made through the filter of what others think about us.
- The fear of man means our lives are controlled by the whims, impulses, and notions of other people.

**Question**—So what do we do about it?

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## THE POWER

### Jeremiah 17:7–8

Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, and whose hope is the LORD. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes; but its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit.

- There is no worry, no anxiety in the year of drought, of the unknown and unpredictable. The one who fears God is secure. Confident. At rest. At peace. Content. Filled with joy.

**Illustration**—The reality of the human condition—what sin ultimately does in us—demands that the universe revolve around us. We place ourselves at the center of the galaxy. But in the galaxy, there is one Star Who is greater than all the others—more powerful, more brilliant, more dangerous, and more beneficial. If you're Mars, and if you demand that the entire galaxy reorient itself around you, you'll destroy yourself and the rest of us in the process. But if you recognize that there is One Who is far greater, far more beautiful, powerful, and good than you'll ever be, you won't be able to help but reorient your whole life to revolve around Him. It's only then your world, and your place in it, will make any sense!

**The fear of the Lord is the very thing  
that frees you from your fear of everything else.  
Fearing God frees you from fear itself.**

### Proverbs 28:14

Happy is the man who is always reverent (who fears the Lord always), but he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity.

### Proverbs 14:26–27

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.

**Application**—When you find yourself afraid of the future, or afraid of a difficult conversation, or afraid of the outcome of an election, for example, that fear is evidence that Christ is not central in your life, that you're no longer fearing God. It doesn't mean those things aren't important, or that you shouldn't care about them—you absolutely should care about them. It means that they've replaced God as your center.

So, what is the evidence that we're in alignment with Christ? What is the evidence of the fear of the Lord?

The primary outworking of the fear of God in your life is **OBEDIENCE**.

### Deuteronomy 5:29

Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!

- God doesn't want you to fear Him for His sake. He wants you to fear Him for your own sake. He calls you to fear Him because He loves you and knows what is best for you!

## EXAMPLES—

1. **Abraham** immediately obeyed when God called him to leave his homeland and start walking, not knowing his destination. He immediately obeyed when God told him to take Isaac up on the mountain and offer him as a sacrifice. Abraham immediately obeyed when God told him to stop and provided a substitute sacrifice.
  - **Delayed obedience is disobedience.** When God told Abraham to go, he went, even though it didn't make sense.

**Question**—How many of us are waiting for obedience to make sense in order to obey? How many of us are delaying our obedience to God because we want to know the outcome before we commit?

God is telling you today, “Obey me first, even if it doesn't make sense! I'll show where I'm taking you when you need to know.”

2. **Moses** eventually obeyed when God asked him to confront Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt, but not before he gave God every excuse possible to try to get out of it:
  - Moses: “Pharaoh will kill me!”  
God: “He might, but go any way.”
  - Moses: “I don't speak well, I stutter.”  
God: “I'll help you. I'll give you words, and take Aaron with you if it makes you feel better.”
  - Moses: “God, you're not hearing me! I don't want to do it. Pick someone else!”  
God: “No. I choose you.”

Moses finally obeyed. Like He did with Moses, God can handle your honesty, reluctance, insecurities, and weaknesses. When you fear Him, you'll bring those to Him, just like Moses did. God will meet you in them and make up for what you lack.

**Question**—How many of us are using insecurities, imperfections, or inadequacies to delay obeying God? Reluctance is never an excuse to forgo obedience. Fear of an outcome is never an excuse to disobey God.

3. **Jonah** was commanded by God to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. Instead of obeying God, he fled. When Jonah ran from Nineveh, he was operating in the fear of man. What happened to him? He was thrown off of the ship he was fleeing in and swallowed by a great fish for three days, after which he ended up preaching the message of repentance anyway.

**Question**—How many of us are operating out of the fear of man and disobeying God in the process?

When you allow the fear of man to govern you and cause you to be disobedient to God, you bring God's loving correction into your life, because God is absolutely committed to your good.

**Throughout the Bible, those who feared God  
OBEYED when it didn't make any sense  
OBEYED when it hurt  
OBEYED at great personal cost**

**Application**—Where is God asking you to obey Him right now? Is there something you need to do that you've been putting off? Is there something you need to stop doing that you've been rationalizing or justifying wrongly? Is there hard conversation you need to have or a difficult decision you need to make?

King Solomon, the author of the book of wisdom and the wisest man ever to live other than Jesus, disobeyed God. He married too many wives and they turned his heart toward other gods and away from the One True God. At the end of his life he came to his senses and came back to God, and this is what Solomon concluded:

### **Ecclesiastes 12:13**

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments: for this is man's all.

## CONCLUSION

Church, God is inviting you today to orient your whole life around Him, to fear Him, to revere Him above all else, and to obey His commands.

**Jesus feared God and had absolute reverence for His Father,  
and because of that,  
He obeyed when it didn't make any sense.  
He obeyed when it hurt.  
*The innocent Son of God obeyed not just at great personal cost,  
but at the HIGHEST possible cost for us.***

When that sinks in, your heart will be filled with the fear of the Lord, and you will be able to do naught else but keep His commandments.

**What's the conclusion of the matter? Fear God. Obey Him completely. This is the beginning of wisdom.**

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## PRACTICAL

### 9-WEEK READING PLAN—PRINTED ON A BOOKMARK

- Read a verse a day to get in the Word, seek wisdom
- A .pdf version of the reading plan is available to download on [gracechapel.net](http://gracechapel.net)

### Q&A LIVE—WEDNESDAY AT NOON

- On Grace Chapel's Facebook or Instagram Live
- Rob will be available to answer any questions you have in regard to the message or how to navigate the time we're living in with wisdom
- Text your question: [gcwisdom to 97000](tel:97000)

### IF YOU DESPERATELY NEED WISDOM FROM GOD NOW

- There is an incredible invitation from God in James 1:  
**James 1:5**  
If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Prior to today, how would you have defined "the fear of the Lord"?
2. Discuss the differences between servile fear and filial fear. Why do you think so many Christians revert to servile fear when thinking of God?
3. Do you agree that the fear of man is a pronounced problem in the modern church? Why?
4. Discuss the dangers of the two extremes of living in the fear of man.
5. How do we become free of the bondage of the fear of man?
6. What does Scripture tell us living in the fear of the Lord looks like? Discuss the examples of Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Solomon, and any others you can think of.
7. Discuss how the greatest example of the fear of the Lord is embodied in Jesus, and what this realization stirs in you.

# NOTES