

# WHOM DO YOU FEAR?

SERIES: CHOOSE WISELY



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Proverbs 1:7

Final Message

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*Proverbs 1:7*

A few weeks ago, I flew to Missouri to pick up one of my children from a summer camp. My flight was delayed. I missed a connection. I had to be re-routed. I landed in Arkansas around 11 PM, then had to drive two hours to Branson, Missouri. In case you've never driven from Fayetteville, Arkansas to Branson, Missouri in the middle the night, let me tell you what it's like: it's dark and lonely along windy country roads.

Halfway into the trip, I stopped at a convenience store in one of the few towns I drove through. It was after midnight, and I felt like everyone was looking at me a bit funny. I got back in my car and started driving. Then I noticed that someone was driving right behind me.

I turned onto my road, and they followed. All I saw were headlights close by in my rearview mirror. My mind started to race. I was sure they were following me to run me off the road and car-jack me. I thought of my family. I wondered whether I had anything in the car I could use as a weapon. I tried to imagine whether I'd be brave enough to use any kind of a weapon. I wished I had cell service so I could call someone. My fear was growing with every minute. They must just be waiting until we're far enough into the woods to make their move.

Then it happened. The car turned onto another street and was gone. It took a while for my heart to stop racing. Finally, I calmed down.

Fear is a powerful emotion. Fear can motivate us. Fear can make us spring into action. Fear can paralyze us. Fear can grow and intensify. Fear can make us concoct disaster scenarios of what might happen.

Today is our last Sunday in the book of Proverbs. We've called this series "Choose Wisely" to indicate that this book gives us a picture of choices we can make. It's not that every phrase describes perfectly the way the world works. We get pithy statements which help us to realize the outcome of the choices we make in life.

Proverbs speaks extensively about fear. In fact, this book uses the Hebrew word for fear more than any other

book of the Bible. In the beginning of the book, we read the key phrase.

**Proverbs 1:7:**

**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.**

This morning we'll be talking about what it means to have "the fear of the LORD." Is it the same kind of fear I felt in the middle of the night on a country road in Missouri? Is it different? If so, then what is it? And what other kinds of things do we tend to fear instead of the LORD? The question for us this morning is simple: whom do you fear?

To be honest, the Bible is a bit confusing on the whole notion of fear. Fourteen different times, the book of Proverbs encourages us to have the "fear of the LORD". It's clearly a good thing.

But in Genesis 15:1, when the LORD appears to Abram, the first things he says is "Fear not." In Exodus 20:20, Moses tells the people, "Do not fear." When the angel comes to Mary in Luke 2:10, he tells her "Fear not." And Jesus himself, in Luke 8:50 says, "Do not fear; only believe."

So are we supposed to be afraid or not?

You might think the answer is an Old Testament / New Testament thing. But in 1 Peter 2:17, Peter tells the church, "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God." In 2 Corinthians 5:11, Paul says of ministers of the gospel, "Therefore, knowing the fear of the LORD, we persuade others." And he tells us in Philippians 2:12, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

But then he says in 1 Timothy 2:17, "God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control." John says in 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." And in the midst of one of the most frightening scenes in the Bible—which we'll be looking at next week—Jesus appears and says in Revelation 1:17, "Fear not, I am the first and the last."

So what it is? Are we supposed to fear God? Or does love cast our fear? How does all this work?

We don't talk much about fearing God. We prefer the verses which talk about love casting our fear. We like to think about Jesus as our brother and our friend. God is our daddy—a tender caregiver, not someone to be feared.

But if that's all we think about, then we're missing something. We're missing a critical aspect of how we view God. That means we don't really know God in his fullness. Perhaps it means we barely know God at all. After all, Proverbs says that fear is the beginning of knowledge. I'm convinced fear of God is the foundation for our entire relationship with him: wisdom, worship, obedience, trust, faith, and love. All of what it means to follow Jesus.

So this morning, we're going to sort through a few things. First, we'll talk more generally about the kinds of things we generally fear. What makes us afraid? Then we'll dive more deeply into what fearing the LORD means in our lives. Finally, we'll talk about what happens as a result when we fear the LORD. What changes in our life?

## What are we afraid of?

Let's start by thinking about our fears. What about you? What are you afraid of?

Fear is a slippery thing. There's all these things on the surface of our lives that we know we're afraid of. But there are some things hidden deep within our hearts. Often we don't know we're afraid of them until we face a situation and our behavior makes it clear that we're afraid of something we didn't even realize.

You may not have known you were afraid of being alone until your children left for college. You don't realize how much you fear the opinion of your boss until you receive a critical review and fall apart. You aren't aware of your fear of failure until something goes wrong and you can't fix it.

Proverbs talks about one area that we tend to be afraid of.

### Proverbs 29:25:

**The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.**

I'm afraid of what you think of me. I'm afraid of what you might do to me. If I'm close to you, I'm afraid you might betray me or disappoint me or break my heart or abandon me or hurt me. I'm afraid of so many things.

Sometimes we call this being a "People Pleaser." A 2012 article in Psychology Today talked about how being a people pleaser can lead to severe health consequences. The author said that the reason people did this was either fear of rejection or fear of failure.<sup>1</sup>

It's all about our fear. When we fear people, we are controlled by them. When we fear people, we give them power over us. When we fear people, we make them god over our life.

Notice what this proverb says. It doesn't say not to fear people because that's a bad thing to do. It doesn't say God gets his feelings hurt when you fear people instead of him. It says when you fear people, you put yourself in danger. "The fear of man lays a snare." In contrast to that, fearing the LORD grants safety.

We are all about safety in our culture. We wear helmets when we bike, seat belts when we drive, and all sorts of padding when we play sports. But sometimes we go overboard with safety. I found a list of ridiculous safety warnings on products.<sup>2</sup>

On a package of sleeping pills: "Warning: May cause drowsiness." On a jet ski near the fuel tank: "Never use a lit match to check fuel level." On a washing machine: "Do not put any person in this washer." And my favorite. On a carton of eggs: "This product may contain eggs."

We are obsessed with being safe. We want to avoid danger. We want our children to avoid danger. But one of the most dangerous things we can do is fear each other. And all of us are guilty of it. When we do that, we put ourselves in great danger. All sorts of terrible things can happen.

Whatever we fear, we put into the place of God. Listen to what God says happens when we fear other gods. "The LORD made a covenant with them and commanded them, "You shall not fear other gods or bow yourselves to them or serve them or sacrifice to them" (2 Kings 17:35).

When you fear a false god, you bow yourself down to them. You serve them, and you sacrifice to them.

When you fear people, you relinquish important things for them—that's sacrifice. You do things so that they'll be happy with you—that's serving them. You look to them to make you happy and keep you fulfilled in life—that's bowing down.

When you fear people, you make them a false god. You worship them. And you put yourself in danger because they can't provide you with the things you need.

Before we can talk about fearing God, we need to lay down the fears we already have. Do not be afraid of people. Do not be afraid of circumstances. Do not be afraid of what might happen if you don't have the education you think you need or your job doesn't fulfill you like you wish it would or your relationships seem fragile. Do not fear.

This is a message I need to hear. Lately, God has been showing me the things I fear. He's been asking me to let them go. It's a risky thing to do because I'm convinced that if I stop fearing them and working so hard to protect myself from them happening, I might get hurt. But the truth is that holding onto those fears is where the real danger lies.

This doesn't mean I won't get hurt. Saying "do not fear" doesn't mean the same thing as "don't worry about it." It's not the same as saying, "It will all work out."

Because a lot of things don't work out. People will judge you. They probably are right now. People will be disappointed in you. They will be angry with you. They'll misunderstand you.

Which is exactly why you shouldn't fear them as gods. They won't deliver in the end. No matter how hard you try, you can't win. Whatever it is you're afraid will probably happen anyway. When you fear false gods, they will fail you. False gods will fail you.

## **Fear God**

But there is another way. Fearing all those things which drive us and control us and dominate our lives is simply pointless because we'll have to face them anyway. But when we fear God, something different happens.

Let's look again at Proverbs 1:7.

**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;**

Also in Proverbs:

**Proverbs 9:10:**

**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,**

Wisdom and knowledge come from fearing the LORD. Now we get back to our original question. What exactly does it mean to fear the LORD? What kind of fear are we talking about?

We don't get much help from the Hebrew word used. When God gives the Israelites instructions for battle in Deuteronomy, he uses this word to say that if anyone is afraid of the battle, they should go home. The word really just means what it sounds like in English: Fear.

We like to soften it and say that it means reverence and respect and veneration and other big words which make us feel better. Those things are true. But it also just means what it sounds like: fear.

Why are we so afraid to fear God?

We're so uncomfortable with the idea that we should have some fear of God? Why do we work so hard to get around that idea? Consider this. If God really is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present, isn't plain old fear a pretty reasonable response to him?

This summer my whole family had the opportunity to go scuba diving. I experienced what some of you have already experienced: breathing underwater; seeing an entire world with hundreds of fish; realizing that the ocean covers 70% of our planet. I had managed to get access to this incredible world.

To come home from that trip, I flew aboard a jet plane. That technology helped me to travel thousands of miles in only a few hours. Of course, I wished it were faster. But this kind of travel was unimaginable only 100 years ago.

Lately, I've picked up trail running. Sometimes I can manage to run up a hill. I couldn't do that a few years ago. I get to the top and look out over the view, and I'm pretty proud of myself. I feel great for what I'm able to accomplish.

But all of that is nothing. Not even drops in a bucket compared to the power of our God. What about the one who made the seas and fashioned each and every fish

who lives within them? What about the one who created the skies and covered the whole earth in no time at all? What about the one who carved those mountains and made my body so that it could function the way it does? What about the God whose very existence holds this world together?

If such a God exists, we ought to fear him. We ought to be afraid. There is no other rational response to a being with such power and might and knowledge. Fear is the only natural way to respond. If we do not fear God, we are fools. Incredibly arrogant or blind or in denial about the world we live in.

I think I'm in control, but I have no control. I think I have plans for the rest of the day, but I don't know what's going to happen to me in the next minute. I think I know some things, but I know nothing compared to God. The only natural response to someone like that is fear. Simple, plain, fear.

If we really know who God is, then we fear him. We need to rediscover the fear of God. Fear God.

Many of us have lost this. We've developed a pragmatic kind of faith in Jesus. We believe in Jesus. We believe he saved us. We follow a lot of the rules. But mostly we just think that being a Christian is living well and going to church. There's not much deep and passionate and worthy of fear in our version of Christian faith.

Fortunately, for us, there is an antidote to that kind of pragmatic faith. It is a book which has perplexed, inspired, and terrified readers for centuries. It's the book we'll begin studying next week. The book of Revelation.

We will see a different kind of Jesus in Revelation. Not the gentle kind of Jesus who carries a lamb on his shoulders. We'll see the conquering Jesus who comes riding on the clouds. The great benefit to a book like Revelation is that it helps us to see what is really true, but which is sometimes hard to recognize.

In fact, the Greek word we translate apocalypse means to uncover or reveal or disclose. We are getting the opportunity to lift up the curtain of this world and see what is really behind it. And I think this is what we need in order to fear God.

I don't think our problem is that we don't know how powerful God is. Or that we don't appreciate it. I think we just forget. We just forget to fear God.

It sounds ridiculous when I point it out. But the truth is that in our day to day experiences, our boss might seem more powerful than God. Our children or our emotions or our parents or our friends—they seem like they play a bigger role. We just forget.

We need to be reminded of what is real. We need to see the truth that lies beneath all of our daily reality. The power of God is unfathomable. His power, and his love, are so much greater than any power we see in this world. That's the path back to fearing God. Peering behind the curtain and remembering what is true.

And when this happens—when we live in the fear of God—our lives are different. Our orientation is not toward the powers of this world, but to the power of God. We do not fear failure or rejection because we fear God's infinitely greater power. When we fear God, we live in the right response to the way things really are. And our lives are transformed.

## **Result of fearing God**

Let's go back to look at our main verse. Proverbs 1:7,

**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.**

When we have an appropriate fear of God, something begins. It's the foundation, the starting place, the origin of everything else. Notice it doesn't say the fear of the LORD guarantees knowledge or wisdom. It's the starting place. The fear of the LORD isn't the last thing. It's the first thing. It leads to something else.

If you read all the verses in Proverbs about where it leads, it's pretty clear. You can't miss it.

Proverbs 10:27, "Fear of the Lord prolongs life"

Proverbs 22:4, "Reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life."

Proverbs 16:6, "By the fear of the LORD, one turns away from evil."

Proverbs 14:6, "In the fear of the LORD, one has strong confidence."

Proverbs 19:23, "The fear of the LORD leads to life, and whoever has it rests satisfied; he will not be visited by harm."

Here's a good summary of all these verse:

**Proverbs 14:27:**

**The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life,  
that one may turn away from the snares of  
death.**

Fearing God leads to life. In one sense, we've already seen why this is true. It's just smart to fear someone as powerful as God. In general, it makes life go better. But there is something deeper here.

You may remember Jesus said something similar. When a thirsty woman asked him for a drink, he told her in John 4:14, "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The Greek word used here for "spring" is the same as the word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in Proverbs 14:27, "Jesus promises a fountain of life. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life."

But we have to understand what God means when he talks about life. It's too easy for us to assume this means God wants us to be happy and safe and comfortable.

Lately, I've been learning something about God that fills me with fear. God isn't particularly concerned about making me comfortable. When God says that he will give me life, he doesn't mean he will write my story the way I want it to be written. God takes the long view. He takes the really long view—he's in this for eternity.

Ultimately, that's a good thing. But for someone like me, who has trouble thinking about next week, much less about eternity, that can be a scary thing. I'm learning to fear God because I'm seeing that he is willing to ask me to walk through some really hard things in the short-term.

Shouldn't we have a healthy dose of fear for a God who asks his only begotten Son to experience humiliation, torture, and a gruesome death? God is not afraid to ask us to walk through suffering in this life. He is a fountain of life, but sometimes it doesn't feel that way.

I've had my share of suffering. I know some of you have suffered deeply. I know you've faced things or are facing things which don't seem like a fountain of life. Things happen, and they don't make sense. People in your life make bad choices. You make mistakes you can't take back. Decisions are confusing and unclear. Just when you think things are OK, someone gets sick. These are the kinds of things God asks us to walk through.

Our natural response to something we fear is to run away from it. When we face things like this and realize what God is asking us to walk through, our tendency can be to run from him. We fear him so much that we run as fast as we can in the opposite direction.

This is where faith comes in. When we put our faith in Jesus, we believe that God might ask us to walk through hard places, but he will eventually lead us out of them. When we put our faith in Jesus, we know that we will suffer in this life, but God will give us a new life. When we put our faith in Jesus, our lives may not play out the way we wanted them to, but God will walk with us along the way.

We fear God, but we stay close to Him. We begin with fear, but we complete our fear with faith. Have fear with faith.

How many of you still get a little scared when you fly in an airplane? It makes sense. When you're on a plane, you are 30,000 feet in the air. If things just stopped, you'd be done. Falling to earth. It's a precarious place to be. But we know that statistically speaking, it's pretty safe. We know enough about how planes work to know that they'll stay in the air. So eventually our fear gives way.

I think that's what it's like to fear God and put your faith in Jesus. Your life is precarious. We live in a vulnerable place. If God were to walk away from us, let go of his hold on us, we'd fall to the earth.

But God doesn't let go. He is with us. That's not just something we say to each other feel better. What does Psalm 23 say, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

When things get difficult, our tendency is to run from him. But that's like running out of an airplane at 30,000 feet. We might be afraid, but we're running from the one person keeping us safe in the turmoil of life. He stays near to us. Our faith can help us to stay close to him. To fear him, but not run away.

I love the picture of walking with God from the C.S. Lewis story *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Aslan, the terrifying lion symbolizes Jesus. Imagine walking with a lion. That's life with God. Should you be afraid. Absolutely. You can't predict what a lion is going to do.

God is a lion. We can't control him or tame him.

But he is a good lion. We know he is good. We know that he is love. We understand that he takes an eternal view. Ultimately, for those who know him, all suffering will be redeemed. This is the faith which carries us through. Fear God, but cling to him at the same time.

## Conclusion

Let's go back to those dark country roads in Missouri. What was I afraid of?

I was afraid for myself and for my family. I was afraid someone would hurt me. I was afraid that my family would be left without me. That fear motivated me. It drove me. It shaped my attention and focus.

There is a lot to fear in this life. So many things to hurt us. People who judge us and make our lives complicated and betray us. Circumstances we can't control. But fearing those things will get us nowhere. Those false gods will become a snare.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.”  
“The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life.”

Some of us have lost our fear of God. We just think God is our friend who's on our side, making things work out in our favor. We need to remember God's power. We need to remember that following Him involves suffering.

But some of us haven't lost our fear of God. We've become terrified of him. We can't believe the way things have turned out. We just want to run away from God because it doesn't make sense anymore. We need to remember God is good. We need to complete our fear with faith and walk alongside him. Stay close to him in our fear.

Whatever you are afraid of in this life, let it go. Don't fear man. Don't worship false gods. Fear the one true God of this world. But don't stop there either. Start with fear, but turn to God in faith. God is good. He will lead you to life.

Whom do you fear? Fear God and live.