

The Fear of the Lord

Small Group Discussion Guide

Proverbs 9:10 — *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

Seven questions drawn from the message. Each includes the passages referenced in the sermon, plus additional Scripture on the same theme for groups that want to go further.

Question 1 — The Two Edges of the Word

The Hebrew word *yir'ah* holds both ideas at once. As English speakers we would prefer two separate words — one for the fear and dread that would make a man run away, and another for the reverence that would make him bow down. Hebrew doesn't separate those for us. And that means we cannot preach the awe and reverence and quietly discard the fear and trembling.

Read: Proverbs 9:10; Exodus 20:18–20

Question: When you hear "the fear of the Lord," which edge of the word do you naturally hear — the running away, or the bowing down? Which one do you tend to leave out?

Follow up: What would be lost if we kept only the reverence and discarded the trembling? What would be lost if we kept only the terror?

Going further:

- Psalm 130:4 — *But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.* Fear that survives forgiveness.
- Hebrews 12:28–29 — worship with reverence and awe, *for our God is a consuming fire.*
- Deuteronomy 10:12, 20 — fear, walk, love, serve, cling. All in one breath.

Question 2 — Fear as Restraint

Moses did not tell the people their reaction was meaningless. He told them what to do with it: don't let it drive you away, let it live within you, *so that you may not sin*. The fear of God stands between a man and the sins he might otherwise be willing to commit.

Read: Exodus 20:20; Proverbs 16:6; Proverbs 8:13; Nehemiah 5:15

Question: Nehemiah had the authority and the opportunity to exploit the people under him, and he didn't — and he tells us exactly why. Where has the fear of God actually stopped you from doing something you had the freedom and the opportunity to do?

Follow up: If the fear of the Lord is meant to restrain us from sin, then a life that shows no restraint should cause us to examine whether the fear of the Lord is truly present. How do you sit with that question honestly, without either dismissing it or drowning in it?

Going further:

- Genesis 39:9 — Joseph, alone, with no one watching: *How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?*
- Genesis 20:11 — Abraham assumes the worst of a place because *there is no fear of God in this place.*
- Job 1:1 — feared God and turned away from evil, stated as one description.
- Romans 3:18 — the summary of the sinful condition: *There is no fear of God before their eyes.*

Question 3 — Holiness Is What Makes Us Tremble

Power alone can make a being frightening, but it doesn't make him righteous. It is God's holiness that makes His power righteous, and His holiness that causes us to tremble. Solomon places *the knowledge of the Holy One* right alongside *the fear of the LORD* — holiness was there in the verse the whole time.

Read: Proverbs 9:10; Isaiah 6:1–5; Revelation 1:12–17; Ezekiel 1:26–28; Daniel 10:5–9; Judges 13:19–23

Question: Isaiah doesn't say "You are powerful." He says, "*Woe is me, for I am ruined.*" Why does holiness produce that response when raw power would not?

Follow up: Every one of these men collapsed. Have you ever encountered anything of God that exposed you to yourself rather than simply impressing you?

Going further:

- Leviticus 10:1–3 — Nadab and Abihu. *By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy.*
- Isaiah 57:15 — the High and Exalted One, whose name is Holy, dwells with the contrite and lowly.
- Habakkuk 1:13 — eyes too pure to approve evil.
- 1 Peter 1:15–17 — be holy, and conduct yourselves in fear during your stay on earth.
- Revelation 15:4 — *Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy.*

Question 4 — The Beginning of Wisdom

Tehillat means beginning — the first instance, the place where something starts. Solomon is not saying the fear of the Lord is the entirety of wisdom. It is the doorway through which a person begins to see God, himself, sin, obedience, and ultimately life itself much more clearly. And when we recognize it, it begins to reorder everything else — what we do, how we act, how we spend our time.

Read: Proverbs 9:10; 2 Corinthians 7:1

Question: If the fear of the Lord is where wisdom starts and not where it ends, what has it started in you that isn't finished yet?

Follow up: 2 Corinthians 7:1 says the fear of God doesn't only tell us what to turn away from — it points us toward what we are to become. What is it pointing you toward right now?

Going further:

- Proverbs 1:7 — the same claim, stated at the front door of the book.
- Psalm 111:10 — beginning of wisdom, with *a good understanding have all those who do His commandments.*
- Job 28:28 — the fear of the Lord defined as wisdom itself, spoken to man.
- Proverbs 2:1–5 — seeking it like silver, *then you will discern the fear of the LORD.*

- Ecclesiastes 12:13 — Solomon's conclusion after everything: fear God and keep His commandments.

Question 5 — Wired to Fear

The body mobilizes when danger is detected — heart rate rises, attention narrows, everything not connected to the threat becomes less important. But the design also includes recovery. The problem begins when the alarm stays active after the danger has passed, when possibility starts to feel like certainty, or when we begin treating the feeling of fear as a command. At that point fear is no longer informing us; it is governing us. Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is proper and faithful action in the presence of fear.

Read: Psalm 56:3–4; Joshua 1:9; 2 Timothy 1:7

Question: David doesn't say "I will never be afraid." He says "*When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You.*" Where is fear currently informing you, and where has it started giving you orders?

Follow up: Can you name a time when fear was standing directly in front of the place where God was calling you to be faithful — and you went anyway? What did that cost, and what did it change?

Going further:

- Matthew 10:28 — the two fears named side by side, and which one is commanded.
- Psalm 34:4 — *He answered me and delivered me from all my fears.*
- Psalm 112:1, 7–8 — the man who fears the Lord *will not fear evil tidings; his heart is steadfast.*
- Isaiah 41:10 — *Do not fear, for I am with you.* The command and the reason.
- Daniel 3:16–18 — *but even if He does not.* Obedience that doesn't depend on the outcome.

Question 6 — Where Fear Leads

Fear can move from something we feel to something we obey. The fear of man is a snare. The rulers in John 12 believed, but loved the approval of men more than the approval of God. Hebrews speaks of people held in slavery all their lives. And Israel, who had seen the plagues, the Passover, the Red Sea, and Sinai, still let a new threat rule them. Fear moved them into weak faith, weak faith into grumbling, and grumbling into refusing to obey.

Read: Proverbs 29:25; John 12:42–43; Hebrews 2:14–15; Numbers 13–14

Question: The more important question isn't "What am I afraid of?" but "What is this fear showing me about where I struggle to trust God?" So — what is yours showing you?

Follow up: Israel had more evidence of God's faithfulness than most people will ever see, and it still wasn't enough in the moment. What does that tell us about how fear actually works? And which of these is yours — silence when truth needs speaking, a delayed decision, an avoided conversation, a refused responsibility?

Going further:

- 1 Samuel 15:24 — Saul's own explanation: *I feared the people and listened to their voice.*
- Genesis 12:10–13 — Abraham, afraid, puts his wife at risk to protect himself.

- Galatians 2:11–13 — Peter withdraws out of fear, and takes others down with him.
- Matthew 25:24–25 — *I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground.* Fear that produces nothing.
- Proverbs 28:1 — the wicked flee when no one is pursuing.

Question 7 — When Fear Loses its Authority

Scripture gives two answers. The love of God keeps us from running away from Him and frees us from condemnation. The fear of the Lord keeps us treating Him with awe rather than casually, and frees us from being ruled by lesser fears. Human opinion becomes smaller. Reputation becomes smaller. Our need for comfort and control becomes smaller — not because those things are unreal, but because God becomes greater in our sight. The goal is not that fear never speaks again. The goal is that fear no longer decides whether we obey our Lord.

Read: 1 John 4:18

Question: Which of the two do you need more right now — the assurance that you are His, or the reminder that He is God? Be honest about which one you have been leaning on and which one you have been avoiding.

Follow up: What would actually change this week if God became greater in your sight than the thing you fear?

Going further:

- Acts 9:31 — the church walking *in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit*. Both, at the same time, in one sentence.
- Romans 8:15 — not a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but adoption.
- Romans 8:38–39 — nothing in all creation can separate us.
- John 10:28–29 — no one snatches them out of His hand.
- 2 Corinthians 5:9–11 — *knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men*. Fear that moves outward, not inward.
- Hebrews 4:16 — drawing near with confidence to the throne of grace.

Closing

- What do you fear?
- Where has that fear led you?
- What would change if God became greater in your sight than the thing you fear?

The love of God tells you that you are His. The fear of the Lord tells you that He is God. And His Spirit gives you the strength to obey.

The Fear of the Lord

Proverbs 9:10 — *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

Introduction

Fear isn't discussed as frequently or as deeply as the subject deserves. It's a topic most people would rather avoid — perhaps because we tend to think of fear as something bad, or as weakness, anxiety, or something we're supposed to overcome on our own.

Fear is much more fundamental than that. Fear is one of the primary faculties of human life. But:

- Fear was never meant to rule our lives.
 - And in the same breath, fear was never meant to be ignored.
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1. The Word Itself — *yir'ah*

The Hebrew word for fear in Proverbs 9:10 is **yir'ah**. It is rich in meaning:

Fear	an emotional response to danger, threat, power, or possible harm
Reverence	deep honor and seriousness toward someone worthy of it
Awe	wonder mixed with humility before greatness, power, or majesty
Dread	fearful anticipation of something serious or terrible
Terror	intense, overwhelming fear
Respect	recognition of another's worth, authority, position, or power
Fearfulness	a state or disposition of being afraid or apprehensive
Piety	devotion to God expressed through reverence and obedient living

As English speakers, we would prefer two or more words here:

- One containing the **fear and dread** elements — things that would make an individual *run away*.
- A different word for the **reverence** elements — things that would make an individual *bow down*.

Hebrew doesn't separate those ideas for us. The same word can describe genuine dread, or it can describe deep awe and reverence. Context tells us which sense is being emphasized, but all belong within the meaning of the word.

In Proverbs 9:10, the context is clearly not describing panic or a fear that causes us to run away from God. This is a fear that draws us into wisdom — reverence, awe, submission, piety, and a sober recognition of who God is and who we are before Him.

But that meaning does not cause the harder edge of the word to disappear. There is still weight to it.

The fear of the Lord is not a casual and distant respect. It is the appropriate response of a creation standing before the holy creator God who made him, who rules him, and who will hold him accountable for his actions.

This matters, because it means **we cannot preach the awe and reverence and quietly discard the fear and trembling.**

2. What Fear Is For — Restraint from Sin

Exodus 20:18–20 — *All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance. (19) Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die." (20) Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin."*

The same Hebrew word used in Proverbs 9:10 is used here.

Context: The people witnessed God in His power and glory. God had just spoken the Ten Commandments. They trembled and stood at a distance in fear.

Moses did not tell them their reaction to God's presence was meaningless. He told them what to *do* with the fear:

- Don't let it drive you away from God.
- Let it stick with you.
- Let it live within you, **so that you may not sin.**

Moses reveals a purpose of the fear of God: **to restrain a man from sin.**

This idea runs throughout Scripture:

- **Proverbs 16:6** — by the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil.
- **Proverbs 8:13** — the fear of the LORD is hatred of evil.
- **Nehemiah 5:15** — Nehemiah refuses to exploit the people under his authority, and tells us why: *because of the fear of God.*

In the books of law, wisdom, and history, the testimony is consistent: **the fear of God stands between a man and the sins he might otherwise be willing to commit.**

A point of self-examination

If the fear of the Lord is meant to restrain us from sin, then a life that shows no restraint should cause us to examine whether the fear of the Lord is truly present in our life.

Whatever we may say or think we believe, the fear of the Lord is supposed to produce something in us — a hesitance, a moment of consideration before sinful action.

3. What Aspect of God Produces This Fear?

You could say we fear **His power** — He is able to destroy us. That is certainly true.

You could say we fear **His judgment** — He is the Judge of all the earth. That is also true.

But neither of these aspects of God fully explains what causes us fear.

If all you had was a being with overwhelming power, he would not necessarily be worthy of worship. He would simply have overwhelming power. **Power alone can make a being frightening, but it doesn't make him righteous.**

It is God's holiness that makes His power righteous. It is His holiness that causes us to tremble.

Back to Proverbs 9:10

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

Hebrew poetry often places two related truths beside each other so that each helps illuminate the other. What Solomon places alongside *the fear of the LORD* is *the knowledge of the Holy One*.

This is not eisegesis — holiness was there the whole time. It just took a little time to catch up to the Scriptures.

Holiness exposes us

God's holiness does not merely overwhelm us. **It exposes us as the sinners we are.**

Isaiah 6:1–5 — Isaiah sees the Lord high and lifted up, and the angels are crying, "*Holy, Holy, Holy.*" Isaiah does not respond by saying, "You are powerful." He says, "*Woe is me, for I am ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips.*"

That is what God's holiness does. When we get a glimpse of who God truly is in His glory, it will reveal us to ourselves as we truly are — sinners standing before a holy God. The impact of holiness is profound. It should be life changing.

Isaiah's response was not excessive. It was the natural response to witnessing such holiness. And this reaction happens throughout Scripture when normal men and women encounter holy beings — God, Jesus, angels — beings not tainted by sin:

- **Revelation 1:12–17** — John sees the glorified Christ, and the sight overwhelms him. He falls at Jesus' feet, in fear, as though he was dead.
- **Revelation 19:9–10** — John is so overwhelmed by the angelic revelation that he falls at the angel's feet to worship, and has to be immediately corrected by the angel that he should worship God only.
- **Ezekiel 1:26–28** — Ezekiel sees the likeness of the glory of the LORD above the heavenly throne and falls on his face.
- **Daniel 10:5–9** — Daniel sees a glorious heavenly figure. His strength leaves him, his appearance changes, and he collapses face down.
- **Judges 13:19–23** — Manoah and his wife witness the Angel of the LORD ascend in the altar flame. They fall on their faces, and Manoah becomes convinced they are going to die because they have seen God.

That is the impact God's holiness has on sin and on sinners. There is no getting around it.

4. The *Beginning* of Wisdom

The Hebrew word used for *beginning* is **tehillat** (tekh-il-law'). It means beginning, the first instance, the place where something starts.

This is significant. Solomon is **not** saying the fear of the Lord is the entirety of wisdom. He is telling us where wisdom **begins**.

Before wisdom can shape the rest of our lives, it begins with seeing God rightly:

- He is holy.
- He is God, and we are not.
- His commands carry authority.
- Our lives are accountable to Him.

When we recognize this, it begins to reorder everything else in our lives — what we do, how we act, how we spend our time.

The fear of the Lord is not the destination of wisdom or the whole of wisdom. **It is the doorway** through which an individual begins to see God, himself, sin, obedience, and ultimately life itself much more clearly.

It doesn't end with turning away

2 Corinthians 7:1 — *Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.*

The fear of the Lord not only tells us what to turn *away* from; it also points us toward what we are to **become**.

That is why those of us who follow Christ should take the fear of the Lord very seriously. It is possible to attend church faithfully, hear good preaching, sing songs that honor God, and still begin to treat Him too casually.

Scripture never presents the fear of the Lord as optional for God's people.

5. How We Are Wired to Fear

Gavin de Becker's book *The Gift of Fear* argues that fear is not necessarily an enemy or a bad thing — he considers it a gift. The premise: fear should function as a **warning system**, recognizing danger before the conscious mind has fully understood what it is seeing. We notice tone, movement, inconsistency, proximity, facial expression, and behavior — often subconsciously — before we can explain why a situation or a person feels wrong.

Biblically, that basic claim holds: **fear can be a gift, but it shouldn't control us**. Scripture does not condemn the mere presence of fear, and fear does not always mean we are moving in the wrong direction.

Fear can:

- Sharpen our attention

- Alert us to danger
- Slow us down and cause us to prepare
- Help us protect people and responsibilities entrusted to us

The body reflects the design — God's design

When danger is detected, the body mobilizes:

- Heart rate rises
- Breathing changes
- Additional energy becomes available
- Attention narrows — everything not immediately connected to the threat becomes less important

This narrowing can preserve life. *A man in a desert who gives equal attention to a rattlesnake and to the color of the sky may not survive the rattlesnake.*

But the design of fear also includes recovery. When the threat passes, the body is meant to stand down. The heart slows. The muscles release. Attention widens back up. The body returns toward its resting state.

Fear is useful when it alerts us to real danger and prepares us to respond.

Where it goes wrong

Fear was never designed to become our permanent condition or our master. The problem begins when:

- The alarm remains active after the danger has passed
- Possibility starts to feel like certainty
- We begin treating the *feeling* of fear as a **command**

At that point, fear is no longer informing us. **It is governing us and our choices.**

Every Christian has to make a decision here. Fear may tell us that something matters, but **it does not get to decide how we respond.** Fear is meant to alert us, not to train us to live in retreat. If we repeatedly allow fear to determine our actions, avoidance becomes a pattern — and the thing we fear gains more influence over us rather than less.

6. A Personal Note

I had a very significant turning point in my own life regarding fear about eight years ago.

Pastor Mark, two days before he went home to be with the Lord, asked me to speak at his celebration of life.

At that time, public speaking was one of my greatest fears. If I had to speak publicly, I would freeze up and stumble on my words. It was terrible. My childhood had taught me it was safest to remain quiet and unseen, and my adult life had confirmed that life was easier when I remained unseen.

But Pastor Mark — my brother in Christ, whom I loved very much — asked me not only to speak, but to lead the entire service. He told me to make sure every message pointed to Jesus, and that there were going

to be a lot of messages given throughout the service. That meant repeatedly standing before approximately 1,000 people and doing the very thing I had spent most of my life avoiding.

I was afraid. But love and obedience required more of me than to avoid this. For my brother Mark, and ultimately for Christ, I faced what I feared.

That experience changed my life. The fear did not disappear entirely, but **it lost most of its authority over me.**

I learned that the presence of fear does not always mean *turn back*. Sometimes fear is standing directly in front of the place where God is calling us to be faithful.

Scripture gives us a pattern for moments like that

Psalm 56:3–4 — David does not say, "*I will never be afraid.*" He says, "*When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You.*"

Fear becomes a moment of decision: **Will I obey the fear, or will I turn toward God and trust Him?**

Joshua 1:9 — Joshua was commanded to be strong and courageous — not because there was nothing to fear, but because God had promised, "*The LORD your God is with you wherever you go.*"

Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is proper and faithful action in the presence of fear.

When Scripture tells us not to fear, it is not always commanding us to feel nothing. It is commanding us **not to allow fear to become the ruling authority in our lives.**

Courage is also given

Fear can be a gift from the Lord — but so can courage. And even courage is not something we simply manufacture within ourselves.

2 Timothy 1:7 — *For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and self-control.*

The Holy Spirit strengthens us to remember what is true, to resist the rule of fear, and to obey Christ while fear is still present. The Spirit does not always remove the frightening circumstance; sometimes He gives us the power to walk faithfully through it.

We may be afraid, but by His power we can still trust, obey, and remain faithful to our God in heaven, and to our Savior, Jesus Christ.

7. Where Fear Leads Us

Fear can reveal a great deal about ourselves. It often shows us:

- What matters most to us
- What we are afraid to lose
- Sometimes, where our trust in God is weakest

That does not make fear automatically wrong, but it does mean we should pay attention to it.

The question is not simply, "What am I afraid of?"

The more important question is, "What is this fear showing me about where I struggle to trust God — where my faith is weakest?"

Scripture gives us many examples of what happens when fear moves from something we *feel* to something we *obey*.

The fear of man is a snare

Proverbs 29:25 — *The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted.*

A snare can trap you. It restricts movement. It takes away freedom. That is what the fear of man does when we begin arranging our choices around what other people may think, say, or do. **God should be who we aim to please in our lives, not man.**

Fear changes what we are willing to say

John 12:42–43 — Many of the rulers believed in Jesus, but would not confess Him openly because they were afraid of being put out of the synagogue.

Their fear of rejection became stronger than their willingness to identify with Christ. John tells us exactly what was happening: **they loved the approval of men more than the approval of God.** Their fear did not remain internal; it changed what they were willing to say and do.

Fear can enslave

Hebrews 2:14–15 — speaks of people who, *"through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives."*

Fear can become more than a momentary reaction. Scripture says fear can actually hold people in **bondage**. A life increasingly organized around avoiding what we fear becomes a **smaller life**, because more and more of our decisions are being made by the fear rather than by faith in God.

Israel at the edge of the land — Numbers 13–14

Israel stood at the edge of the land God had promised them. They saw the strength of the people living there, the fortified cities, and the Nephilim — and they became afraid.

The danger was real. But their fear became greater in their sight than the God who had delivered them from Egypt.

- Fear moved them into weak faith.
- Weak faith moved them into grumbling.
- Eventually they refused to obey God and enter the land.

Understand who these people were. These were God's chosen people. Approximately twelve months earlier they had watched God:

- Devastate Egypt with the plagues
- Spare them through the Passover
- Lead them out of slavery
- Open the Red Sea before them
- Destroy Pharaoh's army

- Provide food for them in the wilderness
- Reveal His presence and power at Mount Sinai

They had seen more evidence of God's faithfulness and power than most human beings will ever see — and still, when they faced a new threat, they allowed fear to rule them.

What this looks like in us

Fear can make us shrink back from something God has called us to do. It can make us:

- Remain silent when truth needs to be spoken
- Delay a decision we know must be made
- Avoid a difficult conversation
- Refuse a responsibility because obedience feels too costly

And, similar to what happened to Israel, **fear can cause us to obey it, rather than obey God.**

8. When Fear Loses Its Authority

How should a Christian respond to fear? Scripture gives us **two** answers.

First: the perfect love of God

1 John 4:18 — *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.*

John is not promising that Christians will never feel afraid. He is speaking about the fear of judgment and condemnation — the fear that we will finally be rejected and cast away by God.

For those who place their faith in Jesus Christ, that question has already been answered.

We are forgiven, received, adopted, and secure in Him.

That does not mean we will never experience fear. We will still face rejection, loss, failure, suffering, and circumstances completely outside of our control. **But none of those things can change our standing before God or separate us from His love. Nothing can snatch us from His hand.**

The love of God assures us that we belong to Him and are secure in Christ. When we understand that, fear loses its authority over us. We do not have to spend our lives protecting ourselves from every possible loss or living under the fear of condemnation. **We belong to God, and nothing can change that.**

Second: an honest fear of the Lord

The fear of the Lord reminds us that **God is God and we are not.**

- His judgment matters more than human judgment.
- His wisdom is greater than our own — so much greater.
- His approval matters more than human approval.
- His commands are not suggestions, and obedience does not become optional simply because it frightens us.

The fear of the Lord puts every lesser fear back into its proper place:

- Human opinion becomes smaller.

- Our reputation becomes smaller.
- Our need for comfort and control becomes smaller.

Not because those things are unreal, but **because God becomes greater in our sight.**

We need both

The love of God	The fear of the Lord
Keeps us from running away from Him	Keeps us treating Him appropriately — not casually, but with awe and reverence
Frees us from condemnation	Frees us from being ruled by lesser fears

And together, they free us to obey the God we love.

We do not face that choice alone. God has given us His Spirit to remind us of what is true, to strengthen us when we are afraid, and to help us obey when obedience is difficult.

The goal is not that fear never speaks again. The goal is that fear no longer decides whether we obey our Lord.

Closing Questions

- What do you fear?
- Where has that fear led you?
- What would change if God became greater in your sight than the thing you fear?

The love of God tells you that you are His.

The fear of the Lord tells you that He is God.

And His Spirit gives you the strength to obey.

So walk faithfully in the will of God, no longer ruled by fear.