

Rev. Derek Geldart

The Fear of the Lord / Philippians 2:12–13

Philippians 2:12–13 NIV

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Jesus tells us that to become part of His family and enter the kingdom of God we must first be "born of water and of the Spirit" ([John 3:5](#)). The Christian life does not begin with self-improvement or religious effort but with a supernatural work of God's grace. When we repent of our sins and place our faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit gives us new life and transforms our hearts. Apostle Paul describes this miracle by saying, "old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#), KJV). Our adoption into God's family is not based upon our own works, as though we could somehow earn God's favor by our own righteousness. Rather, we are saved by grace through faith, a gift from God, "not of works, lest any man should boast" ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)). At the moment of salvation, God places the seal of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts ([Ephesians 4:30](#)), marking us as His own until the day of redemption, and Christ Himself assures us that no one can pluck His sheep from the Father's hand ([John 10:27-30](#)). Yet these glorious truths are never intended to become a license for spiritual complacency or sinful living. The same Apostle who proclaims the riches of God's grace also asks, "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" and immediately answers, "God forbid" ([Romans 6:1-2](#)).

The Christian life is therefore not merely about being forgiven; it is about being transformed. We begin our journey as babes in Christ ([1 Corinthians 3:1-3](#)), but God never intends for us to remain spiritual infants. As we grow in the knowledge of His Word, we are called not simply to hear it, but to obey it ([James 1:22](#)). We are to put away the old manner of life and increasingly reflect the character of our heavenly Father, striving to "be holy" because He is holy ([1 Peter 1:15-16](#)). As we pursue this life of holiness, we cannot help but ask what Apostle Paul meant when he instructed believers to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling." I recently asked artificial intelligence that very question, and I was somewhat surprised by its answer. It began by asserting that when the Bible speaks of "fear," it simply means "reverence." It defined reverence as a "humble, joyful, and worshipful awe that recognizes who God is—His holiness, majesty, power, wisdom, and love—and therefore gladly submits to His authority and seeks to honor Him in every area of life."

It then pointed to the words of the Apostle John:

1 John 4:18 NIV

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

According to this understanding, the fear of the Lord is simply a posture of respect and awe toward God's holiness, majesty, and authority. It should never be understood as terror or dread of divine retribution. Though the children of Israel trembled when the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai and met with Moses ([Exodus 20:18-20](#)), those who have been born again need not fear eternal judgment, for Christ endured the Father's righteous wrath on our behalf at the cross ([Isaiah 53:5-6](#)). AI further concluded that "the Bible contains hundreds of passages treating reverent fear of God as something positive—describing it as clean and joyful, and as foundational to both wisdom and knowledge."

While this position is highly attractive to a culture that often wants "the benefits of believing without adhering to the truth in which they reside" [1], I

cannot help but wonder why so many Christians seem to leave out the words "and trembling" from Paul's command. Certainly, when fear is rooted in the expectation of eternal punishment, it reflects a broken relationship with God. Confidence in God's love dispels the terror of condemnation because believers are securely held in that love and possess the assurance of eternal life [3]. In this sense, John's words are absolutely true: Christ's perfect love drives out our fear of standing condemned before God on the day of judgment. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ([Romans 8:1](#)).

But the absence of condemnation does not mean the absence of discipline.

Listen to what the author of Hebrews says:

Hebrews 12:5–6 NIV

And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,

and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,

and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

The fear of discipline functions as a motivation within the framework of eternal security. The more assured believers are that the holy God is truly their Father, the more their hearts fear Him with childlike reverence mingled with love for His holy majesty [4]. This is not the dread of condemnation but the sobering recognition that our God is infinitely holy and that He lovingly corrects His children for their good. We do not fear God's discipline because we are uncertain of His love; we fear His discipline because we know the holiness of the Father who loves us. When believers contemplate the outpouring of divine wrath upon

the ungodly, those warnings encourage them to hate sin, avoid the path of rebellion, and depend wholly upon the mercy and grace of God [5].

The fear of the Lord is neither terror without love nor reverence without holiness. It is a humble awe that draws us toward God and a holy trembling that keeps us from wandering away from Him. I believe both are biblical and that God graciously uses both to move believers from spiritual infancy toward maturity. We will discover that a proper understanding of the fear of the Lord not only protects us from evil but also awakens within us a joyful pursuit of holiness, producing hearts that delight in obeying the God who first loved us.

Foundation: What Does the Bible Mean by the Fear of the Lord?

Before we can understand Paul's command to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" ([Philippians 2:12](#)), we must understand what the Bible means by fear. The primary Hebrew word **yāre'** and the primary Greek word **phobos** both carry the ideas of the emotion of fear, intellectual anticipation of evil, reverence or awe, righteous behavior or piety, and formal religious worship [6]. Scripture does not force us to choose between these meanings. Rather, it presents them as complementary responses to the living God. The believer no longer fears eternal condemnation because Christ has borne God's wrath upon the cross ([Isaiah 53:5-6](#); [Romans 8:1](#)). Yet the believer still approaches God with profound awe and holy seriousness. The author of Hebrews writes, 'Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire' ([Hebrews 12:28-29](#), KJV). Notice that grace does not eliminate reverence and godly fear; rather, it provides the very foundation upon which they properly rest. Even Moses told Israel, "Fear not... that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not" ([Exodus 20:20](#)), revealing that there is a fear that drives us away from God and a fear that draws us into humble obedience. The fear of the Lord is not merely a doctrine to be understood; it is a reality that protects us from evil, shapes us into Christ's image, and leads us into the joy of walking with God.

The Fear of the Lord Protects us From Evil

Proverbs 16:6 NIV

Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for;

through the fear of the LORD evil is avoided.

One of the clearest pieces of evidence of the fear of the Lord is a growing desire to turn away from evil. [Proverbs 16:6](#) teaches that those who truly fear God increasingly depart from sin because they recognize that all sin is an offense against the holy God whom they love and serve. While unbelievers often view the fear of God as terror of punishment, the biblical fear of the Lord is fundamentally different. It is "not a craven fear but a holy fear, not a terrible fear but a reverent fear, not an awful fear but an awesome fear" [7]. The fear of the Lord draws us toward God rather than driving us away from Him. The love of God draws us into fellowship with Him, while the fear of God keeps us from the evil that would damage that fellowship [9]. Scripture consistently joins the fear of the Lord with turning away from evil [10]. When our deepest allegiance belongs to God, sinful temptations begin to lose their grip because we desire His approval more than the fleeting pleasures of sin.

The fear of the Lord also frees us from the fear of man [12]. Many sins are committed because we seek the approval of others, but when God occupies His rightful place upon the throne of our hearts, the opinions of people lose much of their power. At the same time, we must not ignore the trembling that accompanies biblical fear. The believer no longer fears eternal condemnation because Christ bore God's wrath upon the cross ([Isaiah 53:5-6](#); [Romans 8:1](#)). Yet we should still take sin seriously, knowing that our loving Father disciplines His children. The closer we draw to God, the more we understand both His holiness and our own shortcomings. Therefore, the fear of the Lord protects us from evil

through both reverence and trembling. Reverence draws us toward God because we love Him; trembling warns us away from sin because we know He is holy.

Salvation Must be Worked Out Through Holiness

2 Corinthians 7:1 NIV

Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Holiness is not a popular subject in a culture that prizes personal autonomy and immediate gratification. Many view God's commands as restrictions upon their freedom rather than pathways to abundant life [13]. Yet Scripture teaches that holiness is essential for anyone who desires to draw near to God. To understand holiness properly, we must distinguish between positional holiness and practical holiness. Positional holiness is what Christ has already accomplished for us. Through His death and resurrection, our sins have been forgiven, we have been adopted into God's family, and we stand accepted before God as His beloved children ([Romans 8:15-17](#)). This standing is not earned by our works but received by grace through faith.

Practical holiness, however, is the ongoing work of transformation by which the reality of our salvation becomes increasingly visible in our daily lives. As John Bevere observes, "holiness is a work of God's grace, but I must cooperate with the power He gives both to will and to do what He desires of me" [14]. Our obedience is not an attempt to earn God's love; it is the response of those who have already received it [15]. This is why Paul calls believers to cleanse themselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit. The Christian life is one of continually putting off the old self and putting on the new. Like clay in the Potter's hands, we are not called to direct the shaping process but to surrender to it. The clay does not tell the Potter what it wishes to become; it

trusts the Potter's wisdom and submits to His hands. The fear of the Lord plays an essential role in this process. Reverence for God's holiness creates within us a desire to please Him, while a healthy awareness of His fatherly discipline keeps us from treating sin lightly. Together, reverence for God's holiness and a healthy trembling before His discipline motivate us to pursue holiness, relying upon God's grace to transform our thoughts, desires, and actions so that our lives increasingly reflect the character of our heavenly Father.

Holiness Requires Intentional Pursuit

Hebrews 12:14 NIV

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

The Christian life is not one of passive observation but active participation. While we have been made holy in a legal sense through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, this does not remove our responsibility to pursue holiness in our daily lives through sanctification [16]. The author of Hebrews does not say to casually consider holiness; he says to "make every effort." Holiness requires intentional pursuit. This pursuit is not an attempt to earn God's favor but the natural response of those who have already received His grace. Believers are called to reflect attitudes, desires, and behaviors that are consistent with their new relationship with Christ [17]. Having become partakers of the divine nature ([2 Peter 1:4](#)), we have been given both the desire and the ability to grow in peace, righteousness, and holiness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The goal is not sinless perfection, which remains unattainable in this life [18]. Rather, it is a heart that continually invites God to transform its thoughts, motives, intentions, and actions. As we follow in the footsteps of Jesus ([1 Peter 2:21](#)), we increasingly reflect His character and experience the joy of walking in fellowship with Him.

This is why Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 3:18 NIV

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Notice that transformation occurs in God's presence. No one becomes holy by staring at sin; we become holy by beholding Christ. The more clearly, we see Him, the more deeply we are transformed into His image. Together they motivate us to pursue the lifelong process of sanctification, allowing the Holy Spirit to conform us more and more to the image of our Savior.

The Fear of the Lord Leads to Joyful Obedience

Isaiah 66:2 NIV

Has not my hand made all these things,

and so they came into being?"

declares the LORD.

"These are the ones I look on with favor:

those who are humble and contrite in spirit,

and who tremble at my word.

God declares that He looks with favor upon those who are humble, contrite, and who tremble at His Word. This trembling is not the fear of a condemned criminal awaiting judgment, but the response of a child who deeply loves and respects his Father. It is a recognition that God's Word is holy, true, and

authoritative. Those who tremble at God's Word do not stand above Scripture and judge it; they place themselves beneath it and allow it to judge them. The connection between loving God and obeying Him protects us from reducing faith to mere emotion [19]. To the unbeliever, the will of God is unknown, the message of the cross is foolishness, and obedience appears burdensome and restrictive ([1 Corinthians 1:18](#)). Yet for those who have been born again, Christ declares, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" ([Matthew 11:28-30](#)). What once seemed impossible becomes possible because the Spirit of Truth ([John 14:26](#); [16:13](#)) teaches, guides, and empowers believers to walk in obedience. As James Montgomery Boice observed, "Christ never laid a commandment on man without giving him the strength to carry it; and every commandment that is laid upon us provides another chance to show our love" [20]. Loving God and obeying God are inseparable ([John 14:15](#)). The believer's obedience is not driven merely by duty but by affection. Having received a new nature, we develop a genuine desire to enter God's presence, know His will, and be shaped by His hands because we value Him above all else [21].

At the same time, reverence and trembling continue to work together. Reverence causes us to delight in God's Word because we recognize His goodness, wisdom, and love. Trembling causes us to take His Word seriously because we recognize His holiness and authority. One draws us toward God; the other keeps us from treating His commands lightly. Together they produce joyful obedience. This obedience ultimately produces joy because it aligns us with the God who created us. Those who fear the Lord trust His wisdom above their own, submit to His authority, and find satisfaction in walking according to His will. The more we love Him, the more we desire to obey Him; and the more we obey Him, the more we experience the joy of living as He intended.

The Fear of the Lord Produces True Wisdom

Proverbs 9:10 NIV

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

The fear of the Lord is the foundation upon which all true wisdom is built. Without reverence for God and a willingness to tremble before His truth, we become vulnerable to pride, lawlessness, and spiritual deception. Proverbs contrasts the mocker with the wise person. The mocker rejects correction and resents those who challenge him, but "rebuke the wise and they will love you" and become "wiser still" ([Proverbs 9:7-9](#)). A teachable spirit is one of the clearest evidences of genuine wisdom. When humanity attempts to live apart from God's wisdom, the results are predictable. Scripture warns, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" ([Proverbs 14:12](#)). Throughout history, people have repeatedly trusted their own reasoning, only to discover that human wisdom is incapable of producing lasting truth, righteousness, or peace. The fear of the Lord protects us from this deception by reminding us that God's ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts.

Knowledge and wisdom are closely related but not identical. Knowledge is understanding truth, while wisdom is applying that truth skillfully in everyday life [25]. Biblical wisdom involves sound judgment, spiritual discernment, and the ability to navigate life's complexities according to God's principles [26]. Scripture does not provide a direct command for every situation we will encounter, which is why believers need more than information—they need wisdom. They need hearts and minds shaped by the fear of the Lord. This is where reverence and trembling become essential. The proud man assumes he already knows the way; the wise man fears the Lord and asks God to show him the way. Trembling keeps us humble because we understand the danger of trusting ourselves rather than God. Together they cultivate discernment, enabling us to recognize truth, reject error, and make decisions that honor the Lord. Such wisdom is not acquired overnight. It grows as we saturate our minds with Scripture, walk in obedience, and learn to depend upon the Holy Spirit's guidance. The more we know God, the more we understand His will; and the

more we understand His will, the more wisely we are able to live. Thus, the fear of the Lord is not merely the beginning of wisdom—it is the foundation upon which a lifetime of godly discernment is built.

The Fear of the Lord Leads to Blessing

Psalm 128:1-2 NIV

Blessed are all who fear the LORD,

who walk in obedience to him.

You will eat the fruit of your labor;

blessings and prosperity will be yours.

After everything we have seen, it should not surprise us that the fear of the Lord leads to blessing. Throughout Scripture, God promises His favor upon those who fear Him and walk in His ways. [Psalm 128](#) describes blessings that touch every area of life: meaningful labor, joyful relationships, strong families, and a lasting spiritual legacy. The psalmist paints a picture of flourishing because life is being lived according to God's design. Yet these blessings must not be understood merely in material terms. The fear of the Lord does not guarantee wealth, perfect health, or a life free from suffering. The New Testament repeatedly reminds us that faithful believers may face trials, persecution, and hardship. Even so, those who fear the Lord possess something the world cannot take away: the blessing of God's presence, God's favor, God's wisdom, and God's peace. This is why Scripture declares, "Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who find great delight in his commands" ([Psalm 112:1](#)). The person who fears God discovers that obedience is not a burden but a blessing. Meaningful work becomes an act of worship. Family becomes a place of

ministry. Trials become opportunities for growth. Even suffering is transformed by the assurance that God is working all things together for good.

Throughout this sermon we have seen that the fear of the Lord includes both reverence and trembling. Reverence causes us to delight in God's goodness, wisdom, and love. Trembling reminds us never to take His holiness lightly. Together they draw us into a life of obedience, wisdom, holiness, and ultimately blessing. The fear of the Lord is not the enemy of joy—it is the pathway to it. Those who fear the Lord discover that His ways are life, His commands are good, His presence is precious, and His blessing is worth far more than anything this world can offer. The fear of the Lord begins with seeing God as He truly is—holy, majestic, righteous, and worthy of all honor. It produces reverence that draws us near and trembling that keeps us from treating Him lightly. It protects us from evil, leads us into holiness, teaches us wisdom, and fills our lives with blessing. Far from being the enemy of joy, the fear of the Lord is the pathway to it. The more we fear Him rightly, the more we love Him deeply, obey Him gladly, and delight in walking with Him.

Footnotes

[1] This is not my words, but I am not sure who the author was that wrote this.

[2] D. A. Carson, “1 John—Part 4,” in *D. A. Carson Sermon Library* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016).

[3] C. J. Scott, *Daily Truth: Study and Application Notes for the 365 Day Connect the Testaments Bible Reading Plan* (Surrey, England: Humble Majesty, 2017).

[4] Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology: Man and Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 2:478–479.

[5] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 568.

[6] Anna Hampton, *Facing Fear: The Journey to Mature Courage in Risk and Persecution* (Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2023), 34.

[7] Keith Weber, *Practical Godliness: A Devotional Exposition of the Book of Proverbs* (Leominster: Day One, 2021), 382–383.

[8] Jonathan Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Proverbs*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 128.

[9] John Bevere, *The Awe of God: The Astounding Way a Healthy Fear of God Transforms Your Life*, 106.

[10] Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 245.

[11] Jim Newheiser, *Opening up Proverbs*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2008), 28.

[12] Ibid.

[13] John Bevere, *The Awe of God: The Astounding Way a Healthy Fear of God Transforms Your Life*, 115.

[14] Ibid., 119.

[15] Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 288.

[16] Lee Lewis and Michael Snetzer, “The Pursuit of Holiness,” in *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling: Changing Lives with God’s Changeless Truth*, ed. Bob Kellemen and Steve Viars (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2021), 182–183.

- [17] Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 473.
- [18] R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 203.
- [19] Glenn W. Barker, "1 John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 349.
- [20] James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 127.
- [21] Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in 1,2,3 John* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 124.
- [22] Tony Evans, "Fearing God Enough to Obey Him," in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 2015).
- [23] Leadership Ministries Worldwide, *Psalms: Chapters 107–150*, The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible (Chattanooga, TN: Leadership Ministries Worldwide, 2016), 3:221.
- [24] John Bevere, *The Awe of God: The Astounding Way a Healthy Fear of God Transforms Your Life*, 243.
- [25] Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Two: God, Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 213.
- [26] Dan Lioy, "Divine Wisdom versus Human Wisdom: An Exegetical-Theological Analysis of [1 Corinthians 1:10–2:16](#)," *Conspectus Volume 8* (2009), 41–42.
- [27] John Piper, *Sermons from John Piper (1980–1989)* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2007).
- [28] Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 236.

