

Fear Is The Beginning

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Date: 12 October 2025

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[0 : 00] So this morning I want us to turn back to Proverbs chapter 9 and we can read again at verse 10. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

Our title for this morning's service is Fear is the Beginning, which maybe sounds a little bit vague, maybe even sounds a little bit threatening. But I hope this is going to be a helpful thing for us to think about.

And the reason I want to think about this is because what we're going to discuss this morning is so relevant to all of our lives and to the lives of the people around us. The title is connected to the phrase, the fear of the Lord, which is a phrase that comes up many times in the Bible.

And whenever it appears in the Bible, it's referring to a positive concept. So we see it in the Psalms. We've sung two examples. We sang Psalm 34, teaching us about the fear of the Lord.

We sang from Psalm 111, speaks of the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom. Same statement as Proverbs 9. Elsewhere in Proverbs, you see it again.

[1 : 15] Opening chapter, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. And again and again it comes up. There's an example from 1027, the fear of the Lord prolongs life. You also find it in prophecy.

An important example comes from Isaiah 11. And this chapter in Isaiah is speaking about Jesus. It's a passage that Jesus himself, that's referred to in connection to Jesus.

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his root shall bear fruit. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of the knowledge, and the fear of the Lord.

And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. And so that's the phrase that's coming up in Old Testament prophecy. It's been connected to Jesus himself.

And the New Testament repeats this. Here's an example from Acts 9. As the church is growing, it says that they are walking in the fear of the Lord, in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and the church is multiplied.

[2 : 13] So this phrase comes up a lot. And wherever it comes up in the Bible, it's a positive concept. The fear of the Lord, fearing the Lord, is something that we should be doing. But the language of fearing is not really a positive concept in the eyes of the culture that we live in just now.

And that phrase, the fear of the Lord, actually to us today can very easily sound, it can sound threatening, it can sound ominous, it maybe even sounds off-putting.

And if we were to invite, when we attempt to invite people to church, if we made fear the Lord and come here, that's probably, we wouldn't think that that would attract people.

We think that might actually put people off. And because of that kind of negative association, we can sometimes try and tone down the idea, this concept of fearing the Lord when we talk about it.

And so sometimes we'll explain it and we'll say, well, the fear of the Lord, that's talking about respecting the Lord. And that's absolutely true. That is true. A key part of fearing the Lord is that sense of respect and reverence that we want to display towards God.

[3 : 29] But there's maybe a danger that when we just put it in that category of respect, that maybe we think of it in terms of how, you know, we might apply respect to, I hope this isn't an inappropriate illustration, but if you imagine a bodoch or a kayoch in a nursing home, you think, well, we respect them, absolutely, but we don't really listen to them.

And if they were to advise us in our lives, we probably wouldn't really take it seriously. So yes, we've got this sort of sense of respect for somebody, you know, who's maybe lived their life, maybe up in years, now in a nursing home or confined to their own home, we'd kind of think, well, absolutely, I respect them, but they don't really know much about my life and I don't really need to take what they say very seriously.

It's easy to fall into that trap as we come before the Lord. And I want us to think about the fact today that we need to take the concept of fearing the Lord much, much more seriously.

Because the word fear in Proverbs 9 and the word that gets, this phrase that gets used again and again, is a monumentally serious word and monumentally serious concept.

It's serious for two reasons. One, because it's confronting us with the significance of God's status. Now, this is where it's so important to recognize something, that when the Bible tells us to fear the Lord, it's not telling us to do that because of flaws in God's character.

[5 : 08] And this is where it's difficult for us, because so often other people that we fear, we fear them because of flaws in their character. So maybe if you have, some people have had difficult parents, or some people go to work tomorrow and you've got a difficult boss, or maybe you've experienced a bully in school, or something like that, or a colleague who's aggressive.

And because of their character flaws, you fear them because you just, you know that you're often going to be on the receiving end of something negative. We must never, through which we think of God, and we must never make that the lens, through which we think of God in terms of this concept.

Because God's character is impeccably good. And the command to fear the Lord is not because of flaws in his character. It's because of the significance of God's status.

He alone is God. And what we are before God matters more than anything else. And in one of the most solemn things that he ever said, Jesus makes the following statement.

He says, Don't fear those who can kill the body but can't kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Just reminding us that what we are before God matters more than anything.

[6 : 28] So, fear is a serious word because it's confronting us with the significance of God's status. But secondly, fear is serious because, this word fear is serious because fear is incredibly powerful.

And that's what I want us to think about more today. The fact that fear has a massive influence on us. It directs our choices. It shapes our behavior. There is stuff that you will do and that you won't do this week because of fear.

And what I want us to recognize is that fear is the starting point.

It's the beginning that then shapes our lives. That makes it very powerful, very, very important. And the key thing we have to think about is that if we're not fearing God, we're fearing something else.

And it's exercising our power over us. And often that fear can lead us down very, very damaging paths. For so many of the bad decisions that I have made in my life, the starting point was fear.

[7 : 39] And so again and again and again in our lives, fear is the beginning. And I want us to think about this. And we're going to ask the questions.

What do you fear? Where's that fear taking you? Where does the fear of the Lord take you? So what do you fear? Right, if I ask you that question, what do you fear? What's the first thing that comes into your mind?

You don't need to answer me, but I just want you to do it in your head. What's the first thing that comes into your mind? Maybe it's something very specific, like spiders or flying or the dentist. Dentists for me. Don't like the dentist. These things can be scary for people, but they can also be fairly easily avoided.

You don't like the dentist. You just don't need to go there. Don't like spiders. You can just keep away from them. But maybe your answer to that question is something much deeper. And it's something that is much more difficult to get away from.

Maybe the thing that you fear or the things that you fear are affecting you every day of your life. And there's many, many things that can do that to us.

[8 : 42] And so what I want to do is to just help us think about this. I want to just give you five categories of fear that have definitely affected me in my life. And I'm hoping that some of them will resonate with you as well.

Number one, fear of missing out. So FOMO, as it tends to get called today. We've got great opportunities in life. Things we want to do. People we want to see. Experiences we want to have. And we do not want to miss out on these.

Fear of missing out. Second one, fear of other people. That can affect us at any age. It's definitely prominent at school. You go to school and there's a whole ton of expectations that you have to meet in terms of what you wear, what you say, what you look like, what you do and don't do.

And there's a fear. What will people think of me? What will people say about me? Am I liked? Am I disliked? Will I be accepted? Will I be shunned? We get that in school, but it also follows us through the rest of our lives.

And it can actually affect churches a lot. Fear of other people. Number three, fear of failure. Again, school, your grades, fear of not doing well. Applying to college or university.

[9 : 48] Time to advance in your career. Time to get a better salary that brings a better status in your life. Hopes for a relationship. Even in our hobbies, there can be a crippling fear of failure.

We're afraid of other people being better than us. Afraid of being overlooked. Afraid of not being able to cope. And I think this fear of failure definitely gets intensified today because we live in a culture and an era where all your dreams are supposed to come through.

So there's this kind of expectation that all the things you've dreamt of is supposed to come through. You're supposed to be able to do everything. You're supposed to accomplish everything. And in one sense, that highlights the fact that we do have amazing opportunities in our lives now that can allow us to think and dream big.

And that's a good thing. But there's another sense in which that mindset that all your dreams must come through just raises the stakes and intensifies the anxiety. Because we're afraid of what will happen if we fail.

Number four is fear of something bad happening. That might be to do with ourselves, our health, our job, our possessions, our finances. It might be to do with other people, children, spouse, parents, friends.

[11 : 04] It might be to do with global issues, whether that's war or climate change or politics. Or it might be a fear of change. And the fear of change can affect us.

In a thousand ways, there's a fear of something bad happening. And then number five is the fear of the way things really are. Now, what do I mean by that?

Well, I mean the fact, things like the fact that we can be very afraid to be open and honest about ourselves. Especially the things that we struggle with. We can be very afraid to let anybody get too close to us because we don't want them to see what we're really like.

And also, the fear of the way things really are can apply to the times in life when we feel under stress and under pressure. Because things are building up in our lives and they're starting to overwhelm us.

And so, it's telling us that the fears in life don't just apply to the what-ifs of what might happen. In many ways, the way things really are right now can also cause us a lot of fear.

[12 : 05] So, there's five categories of fear, fear of missing out, fear of other people, fear of failure, fear of something bad happening, fear of the way things really are. And what I want you to think about is the fact that all of these fears are the beginning.

In other words, these fears will lead on to something else. That takes us to our second question, where is that fear taking you? So, let me just go through these passages, these categories again.

Fear of missing out, what does that do to us? Well, it leaves us trying desperately to cram everything into our lives. And that leaves us stretched too thin.

It leaves us trying too hard. It leaves us jealous and frustrated when we do miss out on the things that we badly want. Fear of other people leaves us constantly anxious about what everybody else is thinking and what everybody else is saying.

And that shapes how we speak. It shapes the clothes that we wear. It shapes who we spend time with. It shapes what we spend our money on. And often it can leave us too scared to express our own opinions on a particular matter.

[13 : 18] We just want to make sure we say the right things and that we keep the people that we're afraid of. Happy. Fear of failure is kind of fascinating because it can push us in two directions.

It can paralyze us and it can also drive us to burning out. And so it can paralyze us because we think, well, I don't want to fail. I'm not going to try. I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to apply for that job.

I'm not going to aim for this, that, and the next thing. I'm not going to enter a relationship. I'm not going to do any of this because I might fail. And so we're paralyzed. But at the very same time, fear of failure can also drive us to burnout.

Because you think, well, I've got to prove myself. I've got to show that I can manage. And you're pushing, pushing, pushing to the point where you're breaking. Fear of something bad happening can cast a shadow over every single day of our lives.

So it can leave us paranoid about our circumstances. It can leave us paranoid about people and what they might say or do to us. It can leave us unwilling to take any risks.

[14 : 19] It can leave us, as we were saying, unwilling to let anyone get close to us. It can leave us feeling constantly anxious and depressed about the what-ifs that are looming over our lives.

And then fear of the way things really are, what does that do to us? Well, it leaves us trying our best to block out the stuff we're struggling with.

It leaves us trying to put up a mask so that, you know, no one can see past that. Got a good impression. And maybe in our society today, most frequently of all, it can just leave us driving for anything that will distract us and take our mind off things.

And sometimes that can be harmless enough, but other times that can lead on to even more damaging patterns of behavior. That desire to be distracted or to mask things can leave us, it can push us into excess, whether that's with spending our money or with gambling or getting sucked into social media or alcohol or sex and pornography or any other temptation that's just trying to lure us into a distraction.

And that can sometimes, can very often become an addiction. I saw an astonishing report on the BBC News this week. Maybe you saw it yourselves, that people as young as 28 are getting facelifts.

[15 : 49] And I clicked on the report and it said this girl who was 28 had gone to Turkey for a facelift. It showed pictures of her with bandages all over her head and then a few days, obviously a wee while later, you know, looking different or better or whatever.

And she said, you know, I just want to be the best version of myself. Which is just another way of saying the way you really are isn't good enough. And what I want us to see is that in all these areas, it's so easy to slip into patterns of behavior that are damaging and destructive.

So jealousy, anxiety, burnout, paranoia, addiction, these are not the dynamics that build us up. They're the patterns of behavior that destroy us. And the key point is that all of these will nearly always start with fear.

I'm going to borrow an illustration from Corey Brock. Corey is the minister at St. Columbus Pre-Church and a very good friend of mine. And actually I highly recommend, like if you want to listen to a sermon during the week sometime, go on to St. Columbus and listen to Corey.

He's a fantastic preacher. And he used this illustration. He said, damaging patterns of behavior like anxiety, jealousy, obsessions, addictions. He says, they're like smoke rising into the sky.

[17 : 15] So you imagine, you're looking into the distance and you can see this plume of smoke. And so these things, patterns of behavior, jealousy, anxiety, obsessions. It's like smoke rising into the sky.

And you have to follow that plume of smoke down to its source. Because it's coming from something else. The smoke that's rising into the sky is coming from a fire.

You have to follow it down. Find the fire. And what you'll find is that that fire is very likely to be fueled by something that you're afraid of.

And it's all reminding us that fear is so powerful in our lives. And I guess the key thing I want us to recognize is that very often in life, we're fearing the wrong stuff.

Now sometimes that can be a totally irrational fear. So, you know, sometimes in our lives we have irrational fears. I remember when I was wee, I think I've told you this before.

[18 : 19] When I was wee, I was, I didn't, I was afraid of change when I was wee. I was very afraid of my parents getting a new car. I remember having a nightmare that my parents bought a new car. And I woke up to find this old wreck still outside, so relieved.

But that was, that's an irrational fear. Another irrational fear I have is that every Sunday I have a fear that I won't have enough material to get to 12 o'clock.

That I'll run out of, run out of things to say before 12. And everyone's here is like, oh yeah, right Thomas. But that's still a fear. It's just silly, you know. So, irrational fears we have.

And they can be powerful. Sometimes we can have very appropriate fears. Now, to be concerned about your health or about your children or about your parents. These are appropriate fears. To be concerned about your finance.

These, it is appropriate to care about these things. But the point is that these can spiral out of control. And they can just consume you. And dominate your life.

[19 : 20] And what I'm trying to get back is the same thing. I keep trying to keep saying it again. Misplaced fear is the beginning. Fear is the beginning. It's going to be the starting point that takes you down a path that can cause so much harm.

Now, finally, this is taking us back to the book of Proverbs. Because this is really getting to the heart of what Proverbs is all about. Proverbs is part of what's called the Old Testament's wisdom literature.

That's a big category. Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, other books. And it's all speaking about this whole idea of the choice between wisdom and foolishness.

Wisdom and folly. Wisdom, according to the Bible, according to Proverbs, is the path that leads to life and fulfillment and joy.

And folly is the path that leads to destruction and misery and death. And Proverbs is just confronting us with the fact that we've all got the choice. Which path do we want? The path of wisdom, the path of folly.

[20 : 25] And Proverbs 9 sets that out before us very powerfully. 1 to 11 is just another call to wisdom. I'll just read the last couple of verses there. 10 and 11.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days. Ah. My device needs to restart.

Anyway. Proverbs. There it is. Oh, look at that. It's there. By me your days will be multiplied and years will be added to your life.

It's the path to life. The second half of the chapter, the bit at the end, is warning us against the path of folly. And so if you flick on, if it's possible to get it on to 13 to 16 to 18, it's just a warning against that.

And you see the way the path of folly is described. It's seductive. So it uses folly. So you're going to miss out if you don't do this. And the path can get you to the highest places in the town.

[21 : 28] You see that in verse 14. It's the idea that, you know, that's going to feed the fear of man. Look, follow me. It's going to make you, make others think well of you. Verses 15 to 16.

It's trying to tempt you onto its path. Turn in here for an easy life. Come on. Sit in here. And it's soothing the fear of failure.

Stolen water is sweet. Verse 17. It's basically saying, look, nothing bad's going to happen. Nothing bad's going to happen if you listen to me. And verse 18. It's just, it's blocking out reality.

Hiding the fact that actually this is the path to death. And one of the important points that's been raised here is that the choice between wisdom and folly is not the choice between fear and not fearing.

It's the choice about who we fear. The path of wisdom fears God. The path of folly fears something else. And this is where we actually see that there's actually a connection, a close connection between fear and worship.

[22 : 41] Because when we fear something, we're actually acknowledging that that something's bigger than us. We're confronted with something that we can't control. And, you know, when we're allowing that fear to come over us, we're actually kind of bowing before something because it controls us.

That is all the language of worship. And that's where we discover that fearing something that's not God and allowing that to have that dominant controlling place in our lives is to make that something an idol.

Whether that's our health or our money or our looks or whatever it might be. And so, as we think about all of this, I want you to think of something that you would classify as negative in your life that you wish was different.

Now, that might be something that you've done a long time ago that you just think, oh, I wish I hadn't done that. Or it might be that you're struggling with just now a pattern of behavior that you think, I wish that I was different. And if you can identify something in your life like that, I want you to ask two questions.

I want you to ask, what fear is fueling that? So, whatever it is you're doing, what fear is fueling that?

[24 : 00] And so, you know, when I was afraid of changing or my parents getting a new car when I was wee, and I know that sounds ridiculous, but it was a big fear when I was wee. The reason I was afraid, I was afraid that if anything was different, I wouldn't be happy.

That change was a threat to my happiness. And whatever it might be, whatever it is you can identify in your life, what fear is fueling it? That's the first question I want you to ask.

Second question I want you to ask is, why are you afraid of it? Why are you afraid of that thing?

So, recapping it all, I hope I'm persuading you with what I'm trying to say here. Fear is the beginning. Fear is the beginning. It's the starting point that is going to hugely influence in our lives.

It's going to lead on to patterns of behavior that are going to hurt us and that will hurt others. And so often, those fears are not wise. Instead, they're foolish.

[25 : 09] But at the same time, God's calling us onto the path of wisdom. And the starting point for that path of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. And so that fear of the Lord is not a phrase that we should play down.

Nothing is more powerful than God. Nothing matters more than Him. Nothing is more urgent than your relationship with Him. Nothing is more serious for us to think about. And that confrontation that the Bible presents before us between God's holiness, His majesty, His power, and His magnitude, and my creatureliness, my smallness, and my sinfulness, that's got to make me tremble.

That's got to make me tremble. And, you know, often the Bible will use the imagery of fire to describe God.

And sometimes when we think of that imagery, we think of the warmth of sitting by the fire. And that's a good image to have. But the imagery of fire in the Bible in relation to God should also make you think about being dropped onto the sun.

And that's when you realize, wow, God is so much bigger than I am. And, you know, a fear of God's holiness, His majesty, His power, that's actually the most rational fear that we can ever have.

[26 : 30] It's the starting point for wisdom because it makes us realize that we need to take God more seriously than anything else. Like, that's just, that actually makes sense.

We need to make God, we need to take God more seriously than anything else. So we must not underestimate the fear of the Lord. That's really important. But at the same time, we must not be overwhelmed by this.

Because by using this language, yes, the Bible is seeking to humble us. But it's not trying to crush us.

The fear of God is the beginning. But the key point is that it's the beginning of something more. In other words, the gospel wants to take you from here to somewhere else, to something more.

And that's our final question. Where does the fear of the Lord take you? Well, we can say two things. The first is that the fear of the Lord takes us away from the path of death.

[27 : 47] Proverbs helps us to see that. Here's a couple of examples. The fear of the Lord is the hatred of evil. And I just, you know, when you see that phrase, I just want you to think about that. I want you to think about, like, there's so much stuff that we see in the world just now.

You turn on the news just now. You look at Gaza. You look at Ukraine. You look at other things. And there's just so much that's horrendous. In terms of the way people are behaving towards other people.

Horrific. God hates that kind of evil behavior. And to fear the Lord is to align ourselves with a God who forever says, that's wrong.

And so that the fear of the Lord is turning us away from the, just the awful paths that humanity goes down. And, you know, you've got Proverbs 23 emphasizing that.

Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord. Sometimes people are going down paths that are awful. They treat people so badly. They say things. People who hurt one another. They're cruel.

[28 : 55] They're deceptive. They're manipulative. They're abusive. So many things that are awful. And in all of this language of the fear of the Lord, the Bible is saying, turn the other way. Turn off that path.

And go a different way. Follow the Lord. Follow His ways. To fear God is to care about what God says. To fear God is to listen to the instruction that He gives us.

And that instruction is always, always, always going to steer you away from the path of death. Everything that is destroying people's lives in our society and in the world around us is stuff that God has said, don't do that.

And so, the fear of the Lord turns us away from the path of death. And the second thing is that it leads us onto the path of life.

And again, Proverbs catches this beautifully. Proverbs 14, the fear of the Lord is the fountain of life that one may turn from the snares of death. There we go. That's it. Right there.

[30 : 02] Fear of the Lord is instruction and wisdom. Leads to honor. Fear of the Lord leads to life. Whoever has it rests satisfied. And this is the pattern of the gospel.

This is what Jesus wants for you and wants for me. Jesus is calling us away from sin. He's calling us off the path to death.

And He's calling us onto the path of life. And the change happens through faith and repentance. We're repenting, turning around. We are believing, trusting in Him.

So, there is just that whole idea of turning around off the path that leads to destruction, onto the path that leads to life. And it's echoed in Psalm 111.

I don't have time to go through it. It's on the scene. Go home this afternoon. Read Psalm 111. And just think about all the things that we are being called towards. All the beauty of God's mercy, His grace, His goodness, His truth, His righteousness.

[31 : 01] All of that's in there. You can look at it together. I'm running out of time, as I always do. It's all highlighting the fact that God is to be feared because He's God.

That's just basic common sense. If He is God, then we tremble before Him. God is to be feared because He's God. But God is to be followed because He is trustworthy.

And He is faithful. And He is always and only ever good. And foolishness is really to fear something that is actually going to betray you and leave you hurt and bruised and exposed.

Wisdom is to fear the God who is never anything other than impeccably good and who will never, ever let you down.

You know, when we say that fearing God is taking Him seriously, you know, all of that is grounded in the fact that He takes you so seriously.

[32 : 26] And He actually cares about you more than the very best example of ourselves could care about Him.

As we turn to God, recognizing that we need to be serious about Him like nothing else, as we obey that command to fear the Lord, it's the beginning.

It's the beginning of a good path. It's going to take you on to the path where you experience His goodness, His commitment, His guidance, His gentleness, His correction, His love.

Everything for you and for your family and for your life is wrapped in the unshakable goodness of God and His relentless commitment to His people.

And do you know the amazing thing? It's that when we do that, when we fear the Lord, listen to His voice, follow Him, and experience all that God wants to give us through Jesus in the Gospel, do you know what happens?

[33 : 41] All the other fears lose their grip on us. So I think my list should come up again. There we go. So if you're following Jesus, you're not going to miss out.

Oh man, you're not going to miss out. You're going to have eternity of not missing out in heaven. When you're following Jesus, you don't need to be afraid of what other people think of you because your Father in heaven loves you.

And what other people think of us doesn't actually matter. Our security and confidence comes in Him. With Jesus, you don't need to fear a failure because He's dealt with all your failures already.

They're forever dealt with on the cross. If you're following Jesus, yes, bad things can and will still happen to us, but they're actually only going to bring us one step closer to Him.

And if you're following Jesus, well, the way things really are, you know, at one level, still hard, work will still be stressful, life will still be tiring, and worries will still be there.

[34 : 54] But below that, the way things really are is amazing. Because you are held in the hands of God.

Your name is written on the palm of His hand. And you're loved by Him and kept by Him forever. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of many, many amazing things. Amen.