



What It REALLY Means to “Fear the Lord” (it’s not about dread)

Description



EDIT: This article is in desperate need of an overhaul.

While there are no factual errors (*that I know of*), I’ve learned enough additional context to add this disclaimer. Probably the best way to understand the phrase “fear of the Lord” is “reverent fear”. I’ll overhaul this article when I get time, but unfortunately that probably won’t be soon (*hence the disclaimer*).

For much of my life, I was confused by the phrase “*Fear of the Lord*.” The Bible says God is love, He tells us to call Him Abba and He lets us “*come boldly into the throne room*”... yet we should fear Him?

What sense does that make?

When I hear the word “fear”, I think of dread or terror at an immanent threat to me or my loved ones. However, that’s not what the Bible means by the “fear of the Lord”. In the original language, it can mean something quite different.

(Rather like looking at the Greek makes it clear [why “lusting” in Matthew 5:27-28 doesn’t make all men adulterers](#))

To understand, we’ll need to look at the difference between Hebrew and English.

Differences between Hebrew and English

I must remind you that the Old Testament was written by Hebrews, to Hebrews, in a Hebrew culture, and in the Hebrew language. Therefore, if you want to understand what it means, you need to look at what the Hebrews say it means, specifically what their words mean.

You have to understand that ancient Hebrew is a very “word poor” language.

I don't mean that as an insult (*it's not*) but the Hebrew language has relatively few words. This proper linguistic context is essential to understand what the “*fear of the lord*” actually means.

(And I'm a huge fan of context; as you can see in my articles on [Revelation](#), [Tithing](#), and [why the Great Commission is **not** what you've been taught](#).)

For context, let's talk more about the total word count of the Hebrew language:

The academy of the Hebrew language estimates 45,000 words, in addition to 30,000-35,000 word compositions (school in Hebrew is book-house ???-???, for example), which totals the estimate in 75,000-80,000 meaningful expressions of either words or word compositions. Note that this estimate includes many biblical words still used today.

Hebrew only has ~45k words. If you include compound words you can boost that number, but it's somewhat disingenuous to do so. Combining the Hebrew words for “book” and “house” gives you the “book-house”, which means school, but it's still using the same basic ~45k words.

By contrast, English has a massive word count

The Second Edition of the 20-volume Oxford English Dictionary contains full entries for 171,476 words in current use, and 47,156 obsolete words. To this may be added around 9,500 derivative words included as subentries. Over half of these words are nouns, about a quarter adjectives, and about a seventh verbs; the rest is made up of exclamations, conjunctions, prepositions, suffixes, etc. And these figures don't take account of entries with senses for different word classes (such as noun and adjective).

This suggests that there are, at the very least, **a quarter of a million distinct English words**, excluding inflections, and words from technical and regional vocabulary not covered by the OED, or words not yet added to the published dictionary, of which perhaps 20 per cent are no longer in current use. **If distinct senses were counted, the total would probably approach three quarters of a million.**

Source: [Oxford Dictionaries.com – How many words are there in the English language?](#)

A quarter million (*or more*) vs ~45k.

Yeah, big difference.

And it doesn't even include all the super-technical words that scientists use; that's just words in common use. By contrast, Hebrew has very few words.

Because Hebrew has so few words, each word has a lot of meanings. A great example of this is our English word "fair".

It has more meanings than you can shake a stick at, and here are some of them: (*many of the definitions below lifted from the [Merriam Webster dictionary definition of fair](#)*)

1. marked by impartiality and honesty : free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism
2. not very good or very bad : of average or acceptable quality
3. not stormy or foul (*fair weather*)
4. not dark (*fair skin*)
5. pleasing to the eye or mind especially because of fresh, charming, or flawless quality
6. superficially pleasing
7. clear or legible (*a letter written in a fair hand*)
8. ample (*a fair estate size*)
9. A temporary outdoor amusement park (*going to the fair*)

All of those definitions share a common thread of being good or nice, but that's about where the similarities end. Now, a native English speaker has no trouble deciphering which meaning of "fair" is intended because of the context surrounding it. However, if English isn't your first language, you would probably find our word "fair" absolutely maddening.

Nearly all Hebrew words are like our word "fair".

(*At least, most of the ones I've looked up are that way.*) They all have many meanings because again, Hebrew has a low total word count. Because of the low word count, each word has many meanings.

What the Hebrew word for "fear" means

Let me be clear; "fear" is perfectly valid translation of the Hebrew word "?????" (*yare*, pronounced "yaw-ray"). It's correctly translated "fear" many, many times and it certainly can mean fear. However, it doesn't only mean fear. Remember, it can have other meanings that are only peripherally related to "fear". The list of meanings goes like this:

1. fear
2. stand in awe
3. **stand in fear, reverence honor.**

In an alternate form, it means:

1. Be fearful
2. cause astonishment and awe
3. inspire reverence, godly fear, and awe

(Note: One of the cool things about word with multiple meanings is the ability to mean more than one thing at a time. For example, You can simultaneously use the word “yare” to mean awe, astonishment, and reverence. If an enemy army had just appeared, you could use “yare” to mean fear and astonishment.)

“Yare” means as many or as few of those things as the context dictates.

It can mean only one, or all at the same time.

If you want to know what it means in a specific context, then ask someone who speaks the language as their native tongue. It just so happens, we can do that easily with a quick Google search. the following is an excerpt from [the Jewish Encyclopedia article on “fear of God”](#):

Who fears God will refrain from doing the things that would be displeasing to Him, the things that would make himself unworthy of God's regard. **Fear of God does not make men shrink from Him as one would from a tyrant or a wild beast; it draws them nearer to Him and fills them with reverential awe.** That fear which is merely self-regarding is unworthy of a child of God.

According to the Jews – who were “*entrusted with the oracles of God*” according to Romans 3:2 – the “fear of the Lord” means reverential awe. It doesn’t describe the fear that makes you run from danger; it describes the “reverential awe” that we should have toward God. I don’t expect you to take my word for it, let’s look at some places where it’s translated revere.

(I won’t bother listing verses that show it means fear because there are so many and it’s generally agreed upon.)

Verses that show yare can mean “revere”

Leviticus 19:3

3 Every one of you shall reverence (*yare*) his mother and his father, and you shall keep My sabbaths; I am the LORD your God.

Virtually no one would think you should be afraid of your parents. However, the Bible is very clear that children should honor their parents, and revere is certainly in the ballpark. I didn't fear my father, but I greatly respected him. Revere is certainly accurate when I was younger.

Moving on.

Leviticus 19:32

32 'You shall rise up before the grayheaded and honor the aged, and you shall **revere (yare)** your God; I am the LORD.

Joshua 4:14

14 On that day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; so that they **revered (yare)** him, just as they had **revered (yare)** Moses all the days of his life.

(I'm pretty sure the people didn't fear Joshua or Moses.)

Nehemiah 1:11

11 "O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to **revere (yare)** Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

As you can see, "revere" is a perfectly legitimate translation of the Hebrew word yare (and most Bible translations agree on this).

God made everything and He is a being of truly unlimited power; reverential awe is perfectly appropriate. Further, it makes some Bible verses make so much more sense.

Proverbs 9:10

10 ~~The fear of~~ **revering** the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

That makes sense to me; fear... not so much.

If you revere God you will pursue Him and want to be more like Him – which is extremely wise. I could make a good case that imitating God's character is where wisdom begins. I'd have a much harder time making a case that being afraid of God is the beginning of wisdom.

There are other verses where the same principle applies. I could give examples ad nauseam, but I think you get the point. Yare can mean fear, awe, or reverence, and most of the time it does mean fear. However, it doesn't always mean fear.

The other reason I like “revere” more than fear

You can fear something, but not respect it.

My wife fears spiders, but has zero respect for them. I know people who are afraid of God, but don't respect Him in the slightest. They truly “fear the Lord”... But that doesn't mean they have much respect for Him. But revere is different and it encompasses the idea of respect.

Here is the definition of the word “revere” according to dictionary.com.

to regard with respect tinged with awe; venerate:

The word revere – in my mind – conjures up that “reverential awe” that the Jewish encyclopedia described. Revere means a profound amount of respect; so much that it borders on and/or includes awe or amazement. That sounds exactly like how we should view God to me.

That sounds like the “*beginning of wisdom*” too.

Further, a definition of revere for yare means we want to draw close to Him.

We want to be near the people we respect; we flee from things we fear. Pick a person whom you greatly admire and respect; wouldn't you want to spend more time in their presence? Wouldn't you want to know them more intimately?

Further, if that high respect is “tinged with awe” then wouldn't you want to draw closer to God all the more?

By contrast, fear drives people away (or paralyzes them).

I think the idea that we need to fear God is a natural consequence of bad doctrine concerning Jesus' work on the cross. Most people think God punished Jesus so He didn't have to punish us. That idea is

patently unbiblical, which I show in my article on why Jesus died and what His death accomplished.

Understanding why Jesus *really* died will make you want to draw closer to Him. Thinking of God as a ruthless, vindictive judge who doesn't destroy you only because He already punished someone else (Jesus) wouldn't tend to make people want to be near Him. (*and besides, Romans 2:4 says "it is the kindness of God that leads to repentance"; kindness, not wrath.*)

What About "Fear of the Lord" in the New Testament?

The Greek word translated fear is "?????" ([phobos](#)), the root word of our word phobia. (*as in claustrophobia, arachnophobia, etc.*). Interestingly, it seems to have the same usage and meaning as its Hebrew counterpart.

Usage: (a) fear, terror, alarm, (b) the object or cause of fear, (c) **reverence, respect**.

Thayer's Greek Lexicon lists the meanings as:

1. fear, dread, terror;
2. **reverence, respect** (for authority, rank, dignity)

One example where "fear" is certainly **not** the intended meaning is:

1 Peter 3:1-2

1 In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives,

2 as they observe your chaste and **respectful** (*phobos*) behavior.

Unless you think wives should be scared of their husbands, I don't think fear is in view here. Again, I think the idea is the same as when the Hebrews were told to revere their father and mother. It's respect – not terror/dread – that's in view.

(Again, unless you think wives should literally be afraid of their husbands.)

Another verse:

1 Peter 3:15

15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and **reverence** (*phobos*);

Acts 2:43

43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of **awe** (*phobos*); and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

Matthew 28:8

8 And they left the tomb quickly with **fear** (*phobos*) and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples.

(Great fear and great joy seem impossible to go together. However great joy with great awe (or reverence); I could definitely see that.)

Acts 9:32

31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed **peace**, being built up; and going on in the **fear** (*phobos*) of the Lord and in the **comfort** of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Here we have believers enjoying peace and the comfort from the Holy Spirit... while going on in fear? Again, I think reverence or awe is a better translation because it makes way more sense.

To be clear, most of the time *phobos* **does** mean fear/dread/terror etc. However – like the Hebrew word *yare* – it doesn't always mean fear. Like *yare*, it can mean a sense of reverence or awe and I think that's the intended meaning when it's used as the "fear of the Lord".

I think this because:

1 John 4:18

18 There is no **fear (phobos)** in love; but perfect love casts out **fear (phobos)**, because **fear (phobos)** involves punishment, and the one who **fears (phobeó*)** is not perfected in love.

*(*phobeó is a verb form of phobos, in this case a participle)*

If:

- “God is love” as 1 John 4:8 says (*just 10 verses before*),
- and if perfect love casts out fear,
- then we should have no reason to “fear” God.

However, we should definitely revere God and awe is certainly appropriate too.

Conclusion

Fear is a perfectly accurate translation of the Hebrew word *yare*, but hardly the only one. The Jews have long held that it’s reverence and awe that we owe to God, not “fear”. Further, it just makes so much more sense in many places. That applies to the Greek word for fear (*phobos*) also.

So whenever you’re reading the Bible and see the phrase “fear the Lord”, ask yourself if “*revere the Lord*” makes more sense. (*since they are the same word in Hebrew and Greek*)

Odds are, “revere the Lord” is the better translation.