

Cultivating Awe

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[0:00] So, last weekend I was in Montana. I was fortunate enough to be fly fishing with some good friends of mine. And of course the fishing was great, but my favorite part of the trip was at night when we would sit out on this overlook around a fire.

And I don't know how many of you have had an opportunity to be out in a remote part of one of the western states like Montana, but there's no light pollution whatsoever. We were on a Crow Indian reservation, so there's no light, artificial light, hardly at all.

And when you look up in a place like that and you see the night sky, I felt like it was my first time ever seeing the night sky. First time ever seeing, oh, this is what people talk about when they talk about stars.

It was breathtaking. There were so many stars that you could actually see the belt, that you could see the sort of, see into the spiral of the Milky Way, right? The density of stars like a stripe going across the sky.

It took my breath away. It was amazing. And you've probably had experiences like this, whether you were looking at the night sky, or maybe you were looking out over the ocean, maybe at sunrise or sunset, or maybe when you stare into the face of a newborn child and it kind of captures you, or maybe when you're listening to a beautiful piece of music and it moves you to the point where you can't even express it in words.

[1:36] These are beautiful moments. They're moments that they have a way of interrupting you. Moments where the conversation just stops. They're moments where you forget to breathe.

Moments when you, for a moment, forget your phone, maybe even set it down. We call these experiences awe. These are moments of awe.

And awe is beautiful. Awe is wonderful. What we're going to look at this morning is the fact that awe is also essential. Awe is an essential experience for us as human beings.

Without awe, our perception gets distorted. Our view of ourselves gets twisted. Our whole understanding of God goes off the rails. And in the right context, awe can actually be a gateway into spiritual transformation.

That's exactly what happens to a man named Isaiah when he encounters God. Up until this point, he's known about God. He's known things about God.

[2:43] But he encounters God here in a powerful way. We're going to look more at this in Isaiah 6. And we're going to ask the question, how can awe actually not just be a delightful experience, but be transformative?

And it's because of two things. We're going to look at both. But please join me as we pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that when we open your word, it is your voice that we hear.

So we pray this morning for your voice to speak. Not mine, not ours. Lord, we want to hear your voice. And we want the encounter with you that we will read about here that Isaiah had.

Lord, we want to not just know about you, but to know you. And we pray this for our good and for your glory. In Jesus' name, amen. So the first thing that we see in Isaiah, the first way that awe actually can be a gateway into transformation, is that awe humbles us before the greatness of God. It humbles us before the greatness of God. This passage opens by telling us something that is happening in the world that Isaiah inhabits. Something very big has happened.

[3:59] King Uzziah has died. And that is not good. God's people at this point in history are terrified that they're going to be conquered by the Assyrians, who just get more and more powerful.

And up until now, they have felt safe because King Uzziah sits on the throne. He's a strong king. And they felt good. But now that Uzziah is dead, what hope is there?

Who's going to protect us against the Assyrians? And we can probably all identify with this. You know, life is filled with uncertainty. You think things are fine and then something changes. And all of a sudden, who knows what's going to happen? I think it's very easy for us to get caught up in all of the things in our lives that cause fear and anxiety. They can just become so big that we can't see past them.

That's probably where Isaiah was and how he was feeling until God gives him a vision. And in this vision, Isaiah sees God in all of his majesty seated on the throne of heaven.

[5:04] It is as if to say, Uzziah has died, but the Lord is still on his throne. And look at this description.

It says, His robes unfurl to fill the entire temple. Above him, angelic beings called seraphim are singing praise to the Lord Almighty.

And they're covering their faces because of his glory. And their voices, the voices of these seraphim, rattle the doorposts and shake the ground.

And smoke then billows out to fill the temple. This language is meant to convey the utter, unimaginable greatness and holiness of God.

And that is something I think we often lose sight of. Just the magnitude of the God that we worship.

[6:06] You know, just to try to bring this into perspective, you know, I think one of the problems with our ability to imagine how big everything is, is that most models of the solar system are not built to scale.

And so it looks like everything is really small and close together. What would happen if we were to build a model of the solar system to scale? What would it actually look like?

And I think in order to do this, we're going to need something to represent Earth. And so I found in my kitchen some peppercorns. And so we're going to use a peppercorn here and a scale model of the solar system if Earth was the size of a peppercorn.

Can you see this peppercorn? No, you can't. No, you can't. You can't possibly see this. But I promise it's here. And I'm just going to put this peppercorn right here. This is Earth.

Okay? So just look at that. That's Earth. All right? And if you can't see it, it is there. Peppercorn. If Earth was the size of a peppercorn, and I were to take a volunteer, one of the kids here, and I were to give you Jupiter, where would you need to go in order to be a scale model of the solar system?

[7:26] About 200 feet away. Okay? So somewhere out there on the road. Don't actually do it. This is a thought experiment. But somewhere out on the road, 5th Street, that would be Jupiter.

Okay? Or I'm sorry, that's the sun about 200 feet away. What about Jupiter? If the sun is 200 feet away, then where would Jupiter be? Does anybody know where the Shaw Library is?

All right? So I'd give you another little ball, and you'd have to go all the way down to the Shaw Library. It's over at 7th and Rhode Island. What about Pluto, which when I was growing up was a planet.

What about Pluto? Where would Pluto be if this is Earth, and the sun is out there? Where would Pluto be? Well, Pluto would be roughly the size of a grain of sand, and you'd have to go down to the Museum of Natural History, which is about a mile and a half away.

Okay? Okay, so our solar system is getting pretty big at this point, right? Now, where would the next closest star be in a scale model with Earth the size of a peppercorn?

[8:41] The next closest star in our scale model, you'd have to go to Sydney, Australia. Right? About 10,000 miles away to scale.

Right? So just imagine, Earth is here. The sun is somewhere over there. Jupiter's at the Shaw Library. The next closest star is in Sydney, Australia.

That's why Earth had to be the size of a peppercorn. If it was any bigger, our solar system wouldn't fit on Earth. We wouldn't be able to do it. Right? So just think about that. That gives us some sense of how big our solar system is.

And then if you think about the fact that that's just the nearest star. And our galaxy contains billions of stars.

And then the universe contains billions of galaxies. Right? So just think about that. Let that sink in. And then let this sink in.

[9:48] God created all of that. And God sustains all of that. And God holds all of that together.

It expands your mind. And here's the thing. I think we can become so absorbed in our concerns, in our daily lives.

You know, our problems feel so insurmountable. Our achievements feel so impressive and important. And then we catch just the merest glimpse of the one who made all of that. Billions upon billions of galaxies. And I think this is a bit of what David feels as he writes Psalm 8. He says, When I consider your heavens and the works of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you've set in place, what is mankind that you're mindful of them? Human beings that you care? He's like, how could you even notice us? And yet, if you read the psalm, God cares a great deal about us. Somehow we are both smaller than we think. [10 : 58] And at the same time, we matter more than we ever dared hope. And it's both. Awe is the proper response to God.

And when we experience awe in response to God, it changes our perception in some very important ways when it comes to spiritual change.

This is why Proverbs 9.10 says, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is awe in response to God. The first thing it does is it means that we become smaller in our own estimation.

And praise God for that. Right? The lie of the serpent in Eden that led to the first human beings rebelling against God was essentially, you can be like God.

You can be the same size as God. And that, friends, is the lie that broke the world. And the pride that sits behind that, the pride that it creates in us, that belief, is what sits behind so much of what goes wrong in our lives.

[12 : 17] You know, if you're the kind of person who gets easily offended, you know, you're sort of prickly and touchy and things offend you, and that's pride. That's pride. That's pride.

Getting offended is a symptom of pride. If you're the kind of person who has a really hard time admitting when you're wrong, that's pride. If you can't laugh at yourself when you do something silly, that's pride, you know.

If you're not able to celebrate the success of other people who work in your field without feeling threatened by them, that's pride. The problem is that there are many forces in our culture that seek to stoke that and to encourage it.

It's one of the big dangers of interfacing with AI, for instance, is as we've often talked about, the sycophantic, constantly affirming tone that AI takes with us, I think in many ways is just an echo of the voice of the serpent in Eden.

You know, it puffs us up. It reassures us that we are in fact great. Right?

[13 : 34] It builds us up. And this is why we need awe, because awe in response to something truly great shrinks us down. And that's a good thing.

The second thing awe does is God becomes bigger. Right? Research shows that many people in our country believe in a God who's almost like a life assistant or a genie, someone who's just there to encourage us and help us along and achieve our dreams.

And awe simply corrects that lie. God is nothing like us. He's unimaginably vast. He's infinitely greater than us. And this is why when people in the Bible see God even glimpse His glory, more often than not, they fall on their face in fear, because they think they're going to die.

And I just think, when's the last time I fell on my face in response to who God is? When we get smaller and God gets bigger, a lot of good things start to happen in our lives.

You find that you care less what other people think, because God's opinion matters more. You find your sense of entitlement going down. And so, what happens? You become less resentful and you become more grateful.

[14 : 56] And you tend to become more humble and generous. And most importantly, leading into the second half of this, we can become more honest about who we really are.

As you shrink, in your own estimation, you can start to admit the hard things. And when you can begin to do that, friends, you are on the threshold of real spiritual change.

Not hot air that puffs you up like a balloon, but true growth. Because the second thing awe does is, it opens us to God's grace.

It humbles us before God's greatness, and then it opens us to God's grace. And if we go forward in this story, look what Isaiah says when he sees this vision of God in verse 5.

In many churches, right, today, the way we talk about God, you would expect God, you would expect Isaiah to say, Hey, buddy, how you doing?

[16:02] But Isaiah cries out, Woe to me. I'm ruined, for I'm a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips. And my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.

See, God inspires awe not only because of His greatness, but also because of His holiness. And what that tells us is that it's not just God's nature, it's also His character.

That makes Him unlike anything else in the universe. And biblically speaking, the holiness of God is the primary characteristic. His character is unlike anything else.

The seraphim call God holy, holy, holy, which is an Old Testament way of saying, He is the most holy. He's the embodiment of goodness and truth and beauty.

And so they cover their faces with their wings because He is so pure. So what happens when you come into the presence of a being like that? Well, imagine that you spent all your life, you were born and you grew up in a coal mine, underground.

[17:10] And everyone you've ever known is covered in coal dust. It's on their faces, it's in their hair, it's worked into their clothes, it's under their fingernails. But you take pride in keeping yourself clean.

So you regularly wash your shirt and wash your pants and wash your hands. And you think as you look around, you know, I'm a pretty clean person. You know, relative to all of these other people, I actually do a pretty good job.

Look at my shirt. It's nothing like your shirt. And then for the first time in your life, imagine you come up and out into the sunlight. And you look down.

And you realize that the shirt that I thought was white is actually black. The hands that I thought were clean are grimy. There's coal dust under my fingernails.

It's everywhere. It's embedded in everything. There's dust in every crease, right? And even the clothes that you saved for special occasions, like your formal outfit and attire that you only wear to the nicest occasions, you look at those things and they're filthy.

[18:20] And suddenly you realize you've spent your life comparing yourself to other people in the dark. But now you're standing in the light.

And that is something like what happens to Isaiah. You know, we say, you know, I'm a reasonably good person. Upper 30% at least. When I compare myself to some of the people who live on my street, some of the people I work with, some of my family members, I'm at least better than those people.

We can always find someone whose life makes our life look cleaner. And then Isaiah sees the Lord. Holy, holy, holy. And all of those comparisons collapse.

And Isaiah says, even the thing that he's most proud of and confident in, even his lips, which he uses to praise God, even that is filthy. So in that light, we begin to see the truth.

You begin to see the grime worked into every crease. So you see the pride that has actually worked into your generosity. And how much of it is actually about how you want to be perceived.

[19:34] You see the hunger for praise kind of worked into your service. And maybe you're not as servant-hearted. Maybe, in fact, you just love how everybody calls you servant-hearted.

You see the grime worked into the creases of your politeness. And you realize, you know, beneath that politeness is a lot of resentment. And a tendency to be pretty passive-aggressive at times.

And so even the things that you thought were cleanest about you are pretty grimy. And that's because sin corrupts the very things we offer as evidence of our goodness. So what do you do when even your best clothes need washing?

Well, you need someone to cleanse you and to show you what it means to be truly clean. And that's precisely what God does for Isaiah.

Isaiah cries out because he's unclean. And immediately, God cleanses him. It's debatable whether there is even a cry for mercy here.

[20:38] If you're looking for a formula of repentance, you're not going to really find it in Isaiah 6. He cries out, woe is me, and he thinks he's about to be smited. And God responds with incredible mercy.

And notice, God ministers to Isaiah at the point of his felt need, my lips, but it doesn't stop there. God doesn't just cleanse his lips. He takes away all of his guilt, all of his iniquity, inside out. And then, we see a new Isaiah.

God says, whom shall I send? Who will go for us? And if you know the context, it's a very, very hard mission. Who am I going to send on this mission where you're going to meet a lot of resistance and

pushback?

And Isaiah says, here am I. Send me. I'm ready. He's been changed. Now he's in relationship with God, and he's like, whatever you want, whatever you ask, I'm your man.

[21:42] Now, we may look at all of this, and you may, especially if you're here and you're like, just wandered in and praise God you're here and you're like, I'm glad this several thousand year old story is, you know, getting you keyed up, but what does it have to do with me, with tomorrow?

Look at how God cleanses Isaiah. The seraphim uses a burning coal, a live coal, and that's a symbol in the Old Testament.

Fire represents holiness and cleansing. It can also represent judgment. The coal comes from where? It comes from the altar.

The coal comes from the place of substitutionary sacrifice, the place where animals were offered in place of human beings to atone for sin, but no animal can ever really atone for sin.

It's symbolic. So God, in this vision, cleanses Isaiah with a burning coal that comes from the altar, and he's able to do it because of a sacrifice that happened on that altar that can atone for sin.

[22:53] And it begs the question for Isaiah's original audience, where is the sacrifice that makes this cleansing possible? And it's a big, if you're just hearing this for the first time, you wouldn't know.

Later in the book of Isaiah, many chapters later, Isaiah will talk about a righteous servant who's going to one day come in the future.

And Isaiah says that God is going to put all of the sin and iniquity onto this righteous servant. And that this righteous servant is going to go to the altar.

And he's going to be pierced for our transgressions. He's going to be crushed for our iniquities. And then Isaiah says, by his wounds, we will be healed and cleansed and made holy.

Now, I don't think he knew when he wrote those words who that would be precisely.

[23:57] But we know that he was talking about the coming of Jesus Christ. In other words, how do you make sense of this story? Jesus Christ is the burning coal who sacrificed himself to defeat sin and death.

And just like that burning coal, anyone who comes in contact with Jesus, right, anyone who comes in contact with him, who comes to him seeking to be cleansed, will be cleansed.

That's why in the New Testament you see that Jesus' holiness is contagious. All he has to do is to touch people, right? The leper who's considered completely unclean, completely cast out of society, never to be touched again.

Jesus touches him and his holiness transfers and he becomes clean. He's the burning coal. And just like Isaiah 6, it's not just our felt needs or the things that we confess or know about.

It's everything. He cleanses us from the inside out completely. So just as God brings Isaiah's sin into the light and provides the cleansing, Isaiah cannot provide for himself, so God can do the same for you and for anyone who comes to him in Jesus' name.

[25:19] The stars in Montana were beautiful. You ever get a chance to see them? I highly recommend it.

I felt awe at the greatness of God's creation and that is wonderful. But Isaiah, I would argue, shows us the true purpose of awe and the reason that we were created with a capacity to experience awe. He shows us how awe is actually there to prepare us to encounter God. Awe humbles us before God's greatness. It opens us to the grace of God.

And this, friends, is why we need to guard against things that diminish our capacity for awe. Things like cynicism, which is something that I struggle with.

I tend to be a very cynical person, being the kind of person who habitually dismisses or critiques or makes jokes before anything can actually move us. It's very prevalent in our culture and it's most of the time a self-protection mechanism.

[26:28] It's a defense tactic. We have to be open to being moved by something genuine. Another threat to awe is the perpetual distractions caused by technology.

If we don't separate ourselves enough and allow enough stillness in our lives, our capacity for awe will be profoundly limited. And for some of us, our capacity to feel awe in response to these things is simply the fruit of familiarity.

We've grown up in the church and we've heard these words so many times and we sing the words holy, holy, holy and we've forgotten entirely what they mean. And speaking as someone who grew up in the North American evangelical world most of my life until I was an adult, I think many

evangelicals have lost any sense of awe in response to God.

You hear a lot of talk about Jesus as our friend, which is true, Jesus as our companion, which is true, but I didn't grow up hearing a whole lot about the holiness and the majesty of God that might tempt me to fall on my face.

I've seen a lot of that among my brothers and sisters in the Eastern Orthodox tradition and the Roman Catholic tradition, but I think that we as Protestants in the West have to some extent lost that sense of God.

[27:54] Some churches try to manufacture awe with smoke and lights, confusing sometimes, I think, genuine awe with emotional manipulation.

In order to recover true awe, we need to recover a sense of the holiness of God. I'll end with the words of one of my former professors, Dr. David Wells.

He says, the loss of the vision of God as holy is now manifested everywhere in the evangelical world. It's the key to understanding why sin and grace have become such empty terms.

Divorced from the holiness of God, sin is merely self-defeating behavior or a breach in etiquette.

Divorced from the holiness of God, grace is empty rhetoric, pious window dressing for the modern technique by which sinners work out their own salvation.

Divorced from the holiness of God, our gospel becomes indistinguishable from any host of alternative self-help doctrines. Divorced from the holiness of God, our public morality is reduced to little more than an accumulation of trade-offs between competing private interests.

[29:08] Divorced from the holiness of God, our worship becomes mere entertainment. The holiness of God is the very cornerstone of the Christian faith. It is the foundation of reality.

Knowing that God is holy is therefore the key to knowing life as it truly is, knowing Christ as He truly is, knowing why He came, and knowing how life will end.

let's pray. Lord, may we know this, may we feel it in our bones, in our marrow, just as the voices of the seraphim rattled the doorposts, Lord, I pray that You would rattle our bones with the knowledge of Your holiness.

Lord, I pray that when we pray to You, when we sing to You, we would, by Your grace, have a sense of the vastness.

And Lord, at the same time, because of Jesus Christ, we know that we can know You intimately.

So, Lord, I pray that we would not only feel Your vastness and our smallness, but also we would at the same time, and maybe paradoxically, experience Your nearness, and that we would know when we look at the cross that even though we are small compared to You, smaller than we most of the time think, that, Lord, we matter to You, that You love us more than we ever dared hope.

[30:42] And we pray this for Your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.