

Having Awe For God

by Stephen Elliott

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Scripture: Hebrews 12:28, Jeremiah 2:19, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Romans 12:11, Psalm 33:8, Psalm 111:10

Topics: "Awe of God", "Impact of Reverence on Worship"

Description

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Transcript

Because that's just my nature, not. And so that day when Helen got off work as a nurse at the hospital, I pulled into the front of the hospital. She came out, and when she got in the car, as we came out of the driveway, instead of turning right to go towards our house, I turned left.

And Helen immediately said, where are we going? I said, it's alright. Got something planned. Just hang with me.

Off we go. So we drove a little bit about that, and eventually we ended up on Highway 401, which is a major highway that runs across the south of Ontario, and we're heading towards Toronto. And Helen says, where are we going? And I said, it's okay.

I've got a plan here. Just hang with me. We're going to go do something fun.

So we continued driving. It's about a two-hour drive to Toronto. When we get to Toronto, we turn left and start heading towards Hamilton area.

Helen says, where are we going? And I said, honey, honestly, I've got this. We're going to do something fun for our anniversary. And Helen finally says, oh, I know where we're going.

I know what you've got planned. And I said, what have we got planned? She says, you're going to take me back to Niagara Falls, aren't you? And I said, yeah, we're going back to Niagara Falls, the place where we had our honeymoon. I said, I thought we'd go back and kind of relive everything that happened and all the things that we didn't get to do and see, I hope that we get to do it this time.

So we booked ourselves back into the exact same hotel that we had been on our honeymoon, went into the room, got our suitcases set. I looked out the window way off in the distance. There's Niagara Falls.

You can see it from our bedroom window, but it's way off. It's okay. And now we're going to go do some fun stuff.

So the first thing that we did is that we went down to the place called Maid of the Mist Boat Ride. You know what I'm talking about, Maid of the Mist Boat Ride? Maid of the Mist Boat Ride. So this is a boat that goes up to the very base of the falls where the water falls down.

So we get on board, and you pay your money, you go down, you get on the dock, and they give you these really ugly blue slicker raincoat-type things with a little bit of hooded thing on the thing. And I wanted to make this the very best experience that we could. So I went to the very bow of the ship.

I mean, my hands are on each side of the pointy part of this thing, and I'm right there. Helen is right beside me. Off we're going to go.

We're going to go see the base of Niagara Falls. So the boat leaves the dock. There's Niagara Falls.

It's off to the side. There's the American Falls. It's all crumbly.

It's not much over there. And now we're heading off. And as we get closer and closer to the base of the falls, it gets to be a little bit more and more exciting.

And so I'm standing right at the bow like this, and I'm just hanging on. And now we're getting close to the falls. And all of a sudden, the bow of the boat begins to do this.

It begins to go like this. And all of a sudden, all of the front of the boat is just crashing. And I'm like this.

And there's the fall, 170 feet high, 600,000 gallons per second, crashing off the sprays in your face. The noise is just deafening, crashing, crashing. And all of a sudden, as I'm looking up at the falls, watch my mouth.

This is what it went. I'm looking up at the falls, and all of a sudden, I was conscious that my mouth was open with drool coming down. And I'm embarrassed.

And I look over. There's how I was doing. And I look up and down the railings, and everyone, like this.

And then the boat turns, and everybody's got to get cool again. Okay, that was fun. Let's go do something else.

So if you know Niagara Falls, when you leave the Maid of the Mist boat ride, immediately there's this little hill that goes up, and you get into the touristy area of Niagara Falls. And so we thought, well, let's go to some of the museums and things that we saw the last time and some that we didn't. So we go to Ripley's, believe it or not, and Guinness Book of World Records and all those kind of museums.

And we're going through, and we're holding hands because we're on our anniversary. And all of a sudden this lady comes out of no place, and she says, if any of our vacationers want to see Sandy Allen, follow me. And I turned around and says, who's Sandy Allen? She says, I don't know, but everybody's going.

Let's go. So we dutifully follow the crowd and go down a flight of stairs. And we go into a room.

The room's not much bigger than the size of the platform. And there's this curtain, and the curtain opens, and there's this lazy boy chair. And this lady is sitting there with a microphone, and she begins telling her story.

She says, hi, my name is Sandy Allen, blah, blah, blah, and where she was born, all the rest of that. And she says, when I was about grade five, she says, I noticed something. She said, I noticed that I was taller than all of my classmates.

And by halfway through grade six, she says, I was taller than all of my teachers. And she says, when I got into high school, she says, I was definitely taller than anybody there. And she says, now I am the world's tallest lady.

She says, I'm seven foot, seven inches tall. I weigh 450 pounds. She says, I take a size 23 shoe.

She says, I'm so large, she says, I cannot fit in a normal-sized vehicle. She says, I have to have a specially made van just to be able to get around. And so she's telling us this story.

And then she said this. She says, now I'm going to stand up, and if you'd like to have your picture taken with me, you can have your picture taken with me. So I turned around and I says, chance to meet the world's tallest lady.

I guess I should meet Sandy Allen. So I get in line, and I'm standing with this group of people, and there's Sandy Allen. I mean, she stands up, tall lady, it's okay.

And then I start walking forward in line. And I'm getting closer and closer. Now watch my mouth.

Closer, closer. And when I'm standing beside her, I feel like I'm a grade, like, three, even though I'm a grown adult. And the thought that went through my mind is, if this lady hits me, like, I'm not going to wake up from it.

This is a big woman. Now, right now, let me ask this question. As I talk about Niagara Falls, do you have a sense of Niagara Falls, or as I talk about Sandy Allen, do you have a sense of Sandy Allen? And I think the answer to that question is no.

I may whet your appetite a little bit and say, well, if I have the chance to go to Niagara Falls, I'd like to experience that. But right now, as you sit here, you probably, in honesty, would not say you're in awe of her, because awe can only be experienced in the presence of something that's awe-inspiring. And you're not presently at Niagara Falls, and Sandy Allen's not standing here.

You see, what I did with my mouth is actually descriptive of what the word awe actually means. The word awe means to be overwhelmed by the bigness, the grandeur, the beauty, the power of something. You're open-mouthed with nothing to say.

It's just so magnificent. And you say, why are you telling us this? Because the Scripture says, in Hebrews 12, verse 28, it says, and so let us worship God, bring it up, please, and be thankful, so worship God acceptably with reverence and in awe, for our God is a consuming fire. So right now, are you sensing awe for God? And if not, why not? Is there something wrong with God? Is God awe-inspiring, or is He not? How does the Scripture describe God? In the Old Testament, it says that God holds the waters of the world in the hollow of one hand.

All the Atlantic, all the Pacific, all the Indian Ocean, all the Arctic Ocean, He takes all the waters of all the world, and it's like a little tiny droplet in His hand. So I was at the house one day, and I did a bit of an experiment, and I thought, how much water can I hold in my hand? So I took the tap, I took a tablespoon, and I went like this, and poured a tablespoon of water into my hands, and guess what happened? It leaked. I can't even hold a tablespoon of water in my hand without it leaking, and God can hold all the waters of the world in the hollow of one hand? Scripture says elsewhere that God stretches out His hand, singular, stretches out His hand and touches side to side in the universe.

I'm a piano player. I know what the span of my hand is. That's nine inches right there.

I know what the span of my fingers is. I can't even span a sidewalk, and God goes like that and touches side to side, not just in our galaxy, in the entire universe, He goes like that and touches side to side in the universe. And that He speaks a word, and that billions of stars come into being, and He calls them all by name and places them in the sky.

Billions of stars. I've got three kids, and I mix up their names. And God can keep track of billions of stars, and that the islands of the world, Scripture says, are like little grains of dust in His hand.

There's Great Britain, there's New Zealand, there's Australia, there's some other island, Grand Manan, I don't know, P.I., and He goes like that, and they're like little tiny grains of sand in His hands. Is God awe-inspiring, or is He not? And if He is, then what's our problem? You say, well, Dr. Elliot, Scripture says we're supposed to worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. My problem is that nobody ever told me I'm supposed to worship God with awe.

You say, oh, if you say that, then what you've got to really say is that you don't read your Bible. Because the psalmist in many other places, how awesome is the Lord our God? So we can't just say it's because nobody's ever taught us. Maybe the reason that we don't have awe for God is that we're just overly familiar with God.

We're evangelicals. It's not like we're some cult or some church that maybe doesn't know God. We're evangelicals.

Maybe we're just so familiar with the presence of God that we lose a sense of awe. Helen's brother lived in Niagara Falls for a number of years. One time we were visiting with him, and he took us down by the falls, and Helen and I just happened to be in the back seat, and as we went by the falls, we kind of had our face plastered against the side windows looking at the falls.

And as we were driving by, I think it was Helen said, oh, look, there's the falls, there's the falls. And her brother that was driving says, oh, yeah, there's the falls. Because he had driven by it so many times, it had lost its sense of magnificence to him.

Maybe we're just so comfortable with the presence of God that we lose our sense of awe. Or maybe the reason we don't have a sense of awe for God is that we keep pushing this narrative about God that he's our Father in heaven. Jesus is our brother.

Aren't you glad you're part of the family of God? And we keep pushing this familial relationship with God that he's just our Father in heaven, forgetting that that's only one of the ways that God describes his relationship with us. He is also the potter, and we're like a little piece of clay. He's the master, and we're the servant.

He's the creator, and we're the creation. But we just keep emphasizing this Father relationship that we have with God. Maybe that's why we don't have a sense of awe for God.

I think those may be possibly true, but I don't think that's really the answer why we lack awe for God. I believe the reason we truly lack awe for God is exactly what I described to you if you were listening carefully about my story about Niagara Falls. I said that when we got to Niagara Falls, and when I went in the hotel room, and I looked out the window and said, oh yeah, there's the falls.

Remember me saying that? And then when I said we went on the Maid of the Mist boat ride, I said we went down the stairs, we got on the dock, we put on the blue slicker, and I said, oh yeah, there's the falls over there. And when I was standing at the back of the room when Sandy Allen stood up, I went, yeah, tall lady. It wasn't until I actually got up close to the falls that I experienced awe.

And it wasn't until I walked up close to Sandy Allen that I went, could it be that the real reason that we lack awe for God is that we're not nearly as close to God as we think we are? We know a lot about God, and we take our classes and we can say God is omniscient, we can say God is omnipresent, we can say God is eternal, we can say God is full of love and mercy, we can tell you all kinds of stats about God, just like I can tell you stats about Wayne Gretzky. 61 NHL records, most career points, most career goals, most career assists, most 40, 50, and 60 goal seasons, et cetera, et cetera. I mean, I can rattle off some statistics about Wayne Gretzky.

We had Ottawa senators that came to our church. We had NHL players. I've actually been on the ice with some NHL players.

But if you pressed me and said, do you know Wayne Gretzky? I would say, no, I've got a Wayne Gretzky stick that he actually used in a hockey game, but I've never actually met Wayne Gretzky. So I can tell you things about Wayne, but I don't know Wayne. And we can tell stats about God, but it's entirely different to encounter and experience God.

You say, how do I draw close to God? How do I have these encounters that would give me this sense of awe and amazement at what God is actually like? God makes a promise. He says, if you'll draw a nine to me, He says, I'll draw a nine to you. You see, the reason I experienced awe for Niagara Falls and I experienced awe for Sandy Allen is I made a conscious choice.

I paid the money, went down, got on board the ship, stood at the very bow of the ship. I made a very conscious choice. I want to have the best experience I can.

I made a decision to stand up and move forward towards Sandy Allen. God says, if you will intentionally seek me, I'll be found by you. If you will set aside time, we're not just where we come together corporately, although that's really important, but in privacy, go for a walk down by the river and just look at the amazing

things that God has created.

The heavens declare the glories of God. What may be known about Him is clearly seen from what He has made. And you begin looking at the magnificence of His creation, the beauty of what it is that He has done.

And you begin to just worship God spontaneously in those moments. God says, if you will intentionally seek me, I'll be found by you. You say, Steve, what's the big deal? So what's the big deal whether or not we actually experience awe for God in our times of worship? I'm going to tell you a story, and I suspect some of you in this room are going to think, this is the weirdest guy I've ever met.

A few years just before we came here to start teaching, Helen and I took the kids back one last time to Niagara Falls. And so we went down by the river and we saw the water falling over, and you stand there and you feel like you want to throw yourself in because just the way, the sense of the water falling over, it's just kind of a neat feeling. And then we said, well, let's go up into the touristy area.

So there's this little knoll that goes up, and that's where all the museums are. But there's this little grassy area to the side of the sidewalk. And so Helen and the kids were walking ahead of me, going up towards all the tourist trap stuff.

And as they were walking up there, I was lagging a little bit behind. And as we're walking up, I saw something that I had not seen before on my previous visit to Niagara Falls. I'm walking up.

Helen and the kids are there. I'm walking up, and I see this little water spurting out of the ground. So right there in the grass is just a little artesian well, like a little tiny one.

And this water's just going, right there spurting up. And this, I'm not kidding you, this is exactly what I thought. I looked at that little water going, and I thought, what if a tourist came to Niagara Falls and thought that was Niagara Falls? Is that weird? So they pull out their camera, click, click, click, click, click, click, click.

You know, they do all their touristy things. Then they go home to wherever they are in the world, and somebody says, oh, where did you go? I went to Canada. What about you? Niagara Falls.

What was Niagara Falls like? Really? It's not what I thought. Hang with me. What if a person comes to church, a non-Christian, and after church, they're talking to one of their neighbors, and they say, hey, where were you this morning? Oh, I went to church.

Really, what church did you go to? Oh, I went to that church over there. Really? Was God there? That our lack of awe for God is actually a misrepresentation of what God is like. How dare we misrepresent before a lost world what the greatness of God is like.

Why do we have and need awe so badly? Because the scripture says, what does it say in our scripture passage? Let us worship God acceptably with reverence and in awe. The clear implication is this, that every time we worship, and there is no sense of, that our worship is not acceptable. I'm 64.

There's nothing in church life I think at this point that you can throw at me that I have not experienced or understand. I can do church with the best of them. I'm fourth generation Westland.

I mean, I know church world, and I can do church as well as anybody in this room, if not better. And I can go to church, and I can sing the hymns. To God be the glory, great things he has done.

So love to the world that he gave us his son, who yielded his life an atonement for sin, and opened the life gate that all may go in. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the earth hear his voice. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the people rejoice.

O come to the Father through Jesus the Son, and give him the glory, great things he has done. And do you think God is in heaven going, thanks so much. That was so impressive, your worship of me.

Our lack of awe ruins worship. Awe for God inspires and enables right worship. Why is awe so important? Because our lack of awe misrepresents God.

Our lack of awe, or having awe, if you want to say it in the positive, enables right worship of God. And third of all, awe for God inspires right living. In the book of Jeremiah, God looked at the Jewish people one day, and he says, you've committed two grave sins against me.

Now this is God saying to Jewish people, they've committed two sins against me. What are the two sins that God says they've committed against him? He said, this is the first thing that you've done. The first thing that you did is you turned your back to me.

I don't need God. And you've gone your own way. But then he said this, your second great sin, you have no awe of me.

What is it that causes a teenager to do what's right in the face of peer pressure to do what's wrong? What is it that causes a person to not cheat on their income tax forms when everybody else is? What is it that causes a person to draw a line in the sand and say this far and no further? And I'd like to suggest to you that the person that does that kind of stuff has got a healthy sense of awe because they know someday they've got to stand before the creator of the universe. Someday they've got to stand before this person that can go like that and touch side to side in the universe and hold all the waters of the world in the hand and go like that with the little dust of the islands and he can hold and he can name billions of stars. Someday I've got to stand before this awe-inspiring God and give an account of my life.

Why is awe so important? Because when we don't have awe we misrepresent God. Awe enables us to worship God correctly and it enables us to live God-honoring lives. I'm going to say something next and I do not know who this is for but there is somebody in the room that needs to hear what I'm going to say next and the reason I'm saying that is because God would not left me off the hook with this thing.

I had no intentions of sharing this today but God just kept drilling down, drilling down, drilling down. You've got to share this tomorrow. One of the things that is awe-inspiring about God is His grace.

Grace has got two different definitions in the Bible. Grace is sometimes the mercy, the kindness, the graciousness of God. For by grace are you saved through faith and it's not of yourself.

So sometimes God uses the word grace as a synonym for mercy but there's other places in the Bible where that definition doesn't work. The other definition of grace is God's strengthening. It's His power.

It's His enablement to do and to be what is right in every situation. For instance, at the end of 2 Corinthians, Paul goes before God and he's got a thorn in the flesh. We have no idea what that thorn in

the flesh is but clearly it's something that Paul did not want and three times he begged God to take it from him.

And what did God say in response? God said, my grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in your weakness. Grace is also the enablement of God to do and to be what is right in every situation.

God does not promise to remove the obstacles. He does not promise to remove the hurts. He does not promise that somehow he's just gonna wave a wand and he's gonna magically resolve something.

But I'm here to tell you the grace of God is sufficient to resist every temptation. God's grace is sufficient to persevere against all odds. God's grace is sufficient to forgive the unforgivable.

God's grace is sufficient to stand against every assault. God's grace is sufficient to live noble and righteous lives in the midst of sin and evil. His grace is sufficient to keep pressing on when others falter.

His grace is sufficient to speak the truth when I'm tempted to lie. His grace is sufficient to hold your tongue when you're tempted to retaliate. His grace is sufficient to live without compromising when others are caving in.

His grace is sufficient to remain humble when given the opportunity to be proud. His grace is sufficient to be patient when the answer seems slow in coming. His grace is sufficient to be faithful when you have every reason to walk away.

His grace is sufficient to experience anticipation when others say it's not possible. His grace is sufficient to speak a good word of encouragement when others are speaking words of slander. His grace is sufficient to be steadfast in affliction and courageous in the face of danger.

His grace is sufficient to live in peace in the midst of turmoil. His grace is sufficient to give when others are being stingy. His grace is sufficient to be filled with joys when others are weeping.

His grace is sufficient to live with uncertainty and not to lose hope. His grace is sufficient to be self-controlled when others are throwing off restraint. His grace is sufficient to say true to God in His words when others are abandoning Christ in His word.

His grace is sufficient to love even those who are unlovable. His grace is sufficient to die as a martyr at death, even with a song in your heart, with an eye gazed towards heaven. His grace is sufficient to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer, even if you are the only one.

And this is the amazing, awe-inspiring God that we serve. God's grace is sufficient in every situation to do and to be what is honorable to God all the time. Somebody needs to hear that this morning.

To stand in awe of God Would you stand with me and read our key scripture? Isn't it nice that God is a cuddly fire? Isn't it nice that God is a cutesy fire? Isn't it nice that God is a comfy fire? No. What the scripture says is God is a consuming fire. Has anybody ever been any place where you've seen a forest fire? First forest fire I ever saw absolutely blew me out of the water.

Kentucky, driving up the road. The hill was absolutely ablaze with fire, consuming everything in its path. And as I was looking at this forest fire just raging, my mind went to that scripture.

This is the God that we serve. He's not just a cutely, cuddly little type of fire. He's a consuming fire.

That is the God that he says you need to stand in awe of who I am.

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