

# FAMILIARITY

He said it rather matter-of-factly, probably not understanding the significance of what he was saying, but I couldn't get his words out of my head. He was the head of a national ministry. We were in a meeting, talking about ministry partnership. I was sharing my excitement about what I saw happening in the church around the world, and he said, "I don't think anything excites me anymore." It wasn't my place to respond to what he said, but I immediately thought, *You'd better be excited. You are leading a ministry, and if you can't get your excitement back, maybe you shouldn't be doing what you're doing.* He had lost his excitement, and he was left with a duty to do the business of ministry in repetitive, day-after-day, joyless obligation. What a sad and dangerous place to be!

Perhaps it begins in seminary with the up-close examination of every element of the faith. Perhaps there is a moment when the glory of God just doesn't seem all that glorious anymore. Perhaps living in the middle of a theological community begins to dull my excitement and numb my amazement. Perhaps the Bible gets reduced to little more than a theological manual to be exegeted and responded to. Perhaps even God himself becomes more a divine being to study and theologically understand than the Lord of glory that he is.

Perhaps it is all about the dynamic of familiarity. The great Princeton professor and theologian B. B. Warfield wrote this to his students:

We are frequently told, indeed, that the great danger of the theological student lies precisely in his constant contact with divine things. They may come to seem common to him because they are customary. As the average man breathes the air and basks in the

sunshine without ever a thought that it is God in his goodness who makes his sun to rise on him, though he is evil, and sends rain to him, though he is unjust; so you may come to handle even the furniture of the sanctuary with never a thought above the gross earthly materials of which it is made. The words which tell you of God's terrible majesty or of his glorious goodness may come to be mere words to you—Hebrew and Greek words, with etymologies, inflections and connections in sentences. The reasonings which establish to you the mysteries of his saving activities may come to be to you mere logical paradigms, with premises and conclusions, fitly framed, no doubt, and triumphantly cogent, but with no further significance to you than their formal logical conclusiveness. God's stately stepplings in his redemptive processes may become to you a mere series of facts of history, curiously interplaying to the production of social and religious conditions and pointing mayhap to an issue which we may shrewdly conjecture: but much like other facts occurring in time and space which may come to your notice. It is your great danger. [But it is your great danger *only* because it is your great privilege. Think of what your privilege is when your greatest danger is that the great things of religion may become common to you! Other men, oppressed by the hard conditions of life, sunk in the daily struggle for bread perhaps, distracted at any rate by the dreadful drag of the world upon them and the awful rush of the world's work, find it hard to get time and opportunity so much as to pause and consider whether there be such things as God, and religion, and salvation from the sin that compasses them about and holds them captive. The very atmosphere of your life is these things; you breathe them in at every pore: they surround you, encompass you, press in upon you from every side. It is all in danger of becoming common to you! God forgive you, you are in danger of becoming weary of God!\*

What powerful words of warning to everyone in ministry of any type: "The great danger . . . lies precisely in his constant contact with divine things." What is the danger? It is that familiarity with the things of God will cause you to lose your awe. You've spent so much

time in Scripture that its grand redemptive narrative, with its expansive wisdom, doesn't excite you anymore. You've spent so much time exegeting the atonement that you can stand at the foot of the cross with little weeping and scant rejoicing. You've spent so much time discipling others that you are no longer amazed at the reality of having been chosen to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. You've spent so much time unpacking the theology of Scripture that you've forgotten that its end game is personal holiness. You've spent so much time in strategic, local-church ministry planning that you've lost your wonder at the sovereign Planner that guides your every moment. You've spent so much time meditating on what it means to lead others in worship, but you have little private awe. It's all become so regular and normal that it fails to move you anymore; in fact, there are sad moments when the wonder of grace can barely get your attention in the midst of your busy ministry schedule.

Artists talk of the dynamic of visual lethargy, which means that the more you see something, the less you actually *see* it. On that drive to work the first day, you are conscious of all the sights and sounds. You notice that beautiful grove of ancient trees and that cool modern duplex on the corner. But by your twentieth trip, you've quit noticing, and you're wishing the traffic would move faster so you could get to work, for Pete's sake! Something has happened to you that seems inevitable but is not good. You have quit seeing, and in your failure to see, you have quit being moved and thankful. The beauty that once attracted you is still there to see, but you don't see it, and you cannot celebrate what you fail to see. Could there be a greater danger in ministry than that the one leading the ministry would lose his awe? Let me explain.

Perhaps the place to begin is with one of the Bible's awe passages, Psalm 145.

I will extol you, my God and King,  
and bless your name forever and ever.  
Every day I will bless you  
and praise your name forever and ever.

\* Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Religious Life of Theological Students," from an address delivered by Warfield at the Autumn Conference at Princeton Theological Seminary, October 4, 1911.

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,  
and his greatness is unsearchable.

One generation shall commend your works to another,  
and shall declare your mighty acts.  
On the glorious splendor of your majesty,  
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.  
They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds,  
and I will declare your greatness.  
They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness  
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
The LORD is good to all,  
and his mercy is over all that he has made.

All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,  
and all your saints shall bless you!  
They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom  
and tell of your power,  
to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds,  
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.  
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

The LORD is faithful in all his words  
and kind in all his works.  
The LORD upholds all who are falling  
and raises up all who are bowed down.  
The eyes of all look to you,  
and you give them their food in due season.  
You open your hand;  
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.  
The LORD is righteous in all his ways  
and kind in all his works.  
The LORD is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.  
He fulfills the desire of those who fear him;

he also hears their cry and saves them.  
The LORD preserves all who love him,  
but all the wicked he will destroy.

My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD,  
and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever.

What is the overriding worldview of this psalm? It is that every human being has been hardwired by God to live in daily awe of him. This means the deepest, most life-shaping, practical daily motivation of every human being was designed to be the awe of God. This is the calling of every person. This is the umbrella of protection over every person. This is the reality that is to define and give shape to every other reality in a person's life. What does this functionally look like?

Well, it should be the thing that in some way motivates everything I do and say. Awe of God should be the reason I do what I do with my thoughts. It should be the reason I desire what I desire. Awe of God should be the reason I treat my wife the way I do and parent my children in the manner I do. It should be the reason I function the way I do at my job or handle my finances the way I do. It should structure the way I think about physical possession and personal position and power. Awe of God should shape and motivate my relationship with my extended family and neighbors. Awe of God should give direction to the way I live as a citizen of the wider community. It should form the way that I think about myself and my expectations of others. Awe of God should lift me out of my darkest moments of discouragement and be the source of my most exuberant celebrations. Awe of God should make me more self-aware and more mournful of my sin while it makes me more patient with and tender toward the weakness of others. It should give me courage I would have no other way and wisdom to know when I am out of my league. Awe of God is meant to rule every domain of my existence.

But there is more. Awe of God must dominate my ministry, because one of the central missional gifts of the gospel of Jesus Christ is to give people back their awe of God. A human being who is not living in a

functional awe of God is a profoundly disadvantaged human being. He is off the rails, trying to propel the train of his life in a meadow, and he may not even know it. The spiritual danger here is that when awe of God is absent, it is quickly replaced by our awe of ourselves. If you are not living for God, the only alternative is to live for yourself. So a central ministry of the church must be to do anything it can to be used of God to turn people back to the one thing for which they were created: to live in a sturdy, joyful, faithful awe of God.

This means that every sermon should be prepared by a person whose study is marked by awe of God. The sermon must be delivered in awe and have as its purpose to motivate awe in those who hear. Children's ministry must have as its goal to ignite in young children a life-shaping awe of God. The youth ministry of the church must move beyond Bible entertainment and do all it can to help teens to see God's glory and name it as the thing for which they will live. Women's ministry must do more than give women a place to fellowship with one another and do crafts. Women need to be rescued from themselves and a myriad of self-interests that nip at their hearts, and awe of God provides that rescue. Men's ministries need to recognize the coldness in the heart of so many men to the things of God and confront and stimulate men with their identity as those created to live and lead out of a humble zeal for God's glory rather than their own. Missions and evangelism must be awe-driven. Remember, Paul argues that this is the reason for the cross. He says that Jesus came so that "those who live may no longer live for themselves, but for him who loved them and gave himself for them" (see 2 Cor. 5:15).

Awe of God is one of the things that will keep a church from running off its rails and being diverted by the many agendas that can sidetrack any congregation. Awe of God puts theology in its place. Theology is vitally important, but whatever awe of theology we have is dangerous if it doesn't produce in us a practical awe of God. Awe of God puts the ministry strategies of the church in their proper place. We don't put our trust in our strategies but in the God of awesome glory, who is the head of the church we are endeavoring to lead well.

Awe of God puts ministry gifts and experience in their proper place. We cannot grow arrogant and smug about our gifts, because unless those gifts are empowered by the glorious grace of the God we serve, they have no power to rescue or change anyone. Awe of God puts our music and liturgy in its proper place. Yes, we should want to lead people in worship that is both biblical and engaging, but we have no power to really engage the heart of people without the awesome presence of the Holy Spirit, who propels and applies all we seek to do. Awe of God puts our buildings and property in their proper place. How a building is constructed, maintained, and used is a very important issue, but buildings have never called or justified anyone; only a God of awesome sovereign grace is able to do so. Awe of God puts our history and traditions in their proper place. Yes, we should be thankful for the ways God has worked in our past, and we should seek to retain the things that are a proper expression of what he says is important, but we don't rest in our history; we rest in the God of glory, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever!

We must be committed to do anything we can to be that generation that commends God's works, his glory, to the next generation so that they may be rescued and motivated by a glory bigger than the typical catalog of glories they would choose for themselves.

Now, it's very hard to preach and shape the ministry of the church this way if familiarity has produced a blindness that has effectively robbed you of your awe of God. It is very difficult in ministry to give away what you do not possess yourself (a major theme of this book). In ways of which you are not always aware, your ministry is always shaped by what is in functional control of your heart. If you are more motivated by the awe-inspiring experience of having the esteem and respect of the people around you, you will do ministry in a way that is structured to get that respect, even though you probably aren't aware of it. If your heart is ruled by the awesome power that comes from controlling the people and situations around you, you will work in your ministry to be in control. If your heart is more ruled by fear of man than by fear of God, you will build a ministry that erects walls

of protection around you and builds a moat between your public persona and your private life. If your heart is more moved by the awe-stimulating experience of being theologically right than by an awe of God, who lives at the center of all that theology, you will be a theological gatekeeper who does not pastor messy people well. If your heart is ruled more by envy over the awe-inspiring ministry of another than by an awe of the God who has called and gifted you, you will minister out of a debilitating dissatisfaction with the situation and location of your calling.

Remember again that the ministry you are doing is never just shaped by your gifts, knowledge, skill, and experience. It is always also shaped by the true condition of your heart. This is why it is important to acknowledge that local church ministry is one big glory war. In every situation, location, and relationship of your ministry there is a war going on for what glory will magnetize your heart and, therefore, shape your ministry. There is a war going on between the awe of God and all of the awe-inspiring things that are around you that God created. Awe of God will capture you and your ministry, or you will be captured by some kind of created awe. Remember, any glorious thing in creation was given that glory by God so it would function as a finger pointing you to the one glory that should rule your heart—him.

The fact of the matter is that many pastors become awe numb or awe confused, or they get awe kidnapped. Many pastors look at glory and don't see glory anymore. Many pastors are just cranking out because they don't know what else to do. Many pastors preach a boring, uninspiring gospel that makes you wonder why more people aren't sleeping their way through it. Many pastors are better at arguing fine points of doctrine than at stimulating divine wonder. Many pastors seem more stimulated by the next ministry vision or the next step in the strategic plan than by the stunning glory of the grand intervention of grace into sin-broken hearts. The glories of being right, successful, in control, esteemed, and secure often become more influential in the way that ministry is done than the awesome realities of the presence, sovereignty, power, and love of God. Many

pastors have lost their awe and either don't know it or don't know how to get it back.

### **THE PRACTICAL MINISTRY FRUIT OF THE AWE OF GOD**

What things does the awe of God produce in the heart of a pastor that are vital for an effective, God-honoring, and productive ministry? Below is your list.

#### **1) HUMILITY**

There is nothing that will put you in your place, nothing that will correct your distorted view of yourself, nothing that will yank you out of your functional arrogance, or nothing that will take the winds out of the sails of your self-righteousness like standing, without defense, before the awesome glory of God.

In the face of his glory I am left naked with no glory whatsoever to hold before myself or anyone else. As long as I am comparing myself to others, I can always find someone whose existence seems to be an argument for how righteous I am. But if I compare the filthy rags of my righteousness to the pure and forever unstained linen of God's righteousness, I want to run and hide in heartbreaking shame.

This is exactly what happened to Isaiah, recorded in Isaiah 6. He stands before the awesome throne of God's glory and says, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (v. 5). Isaiah is not speaking in formal religious hyperbole here. He is not trying to ingratiate himself with God by being oh so humble. No, it is only in light of the awesome glory and holiness of God that you come to have an accurate view of yourself and the depth of your need for the rescue that only a God of glorious grace can provide.

Somewhere along the way in ministry, too many pastors have forgotten who they are. They have a bloated, distorted, grandiose view of themselves that renders them largely unapproachable and allows them to justify things they think, desire, say, and do that simply are not biblically justifiable. I have been there and at times fall into being there again, and when I am there, I need to be rescued from me. When

you are too much in awe of you, you set up to be a self-righteous, controlling, overconfident, judgmental, unfalteringly opinionated, ecclesiastical autocrat, unwittingly building a kingdom whose throne will be inhabited by you, no matter how much you are able to convince yourself that you do it all for the glory of God.

## 2) TENDERNESS

The humility that awe of God is alone able to produce in my heart—that is, an awareness of my sin and desperate need for grace—then produces pastoral tenderness toward the people around me, who give empirical evidence that they are in need of the same grace. No one gives grace better than a person who is deeply persuaded that he needs it himself and is being given it in Christ. This tenderness causes me to be gracious, gentle, patient, understanding, and hopeful in the face of the sin of others, while never compromising God's holy call. It protects me from deadly assessments like, "I can't believe you would do such a thing," or, "I would never have thought of . . .," that are me telling me that I am essentially different from the people to whom I minister. It's hard to bring the gospel to people I am looking down my nose at or neither like nor respect. In the face of the sin of others, awe-inspired tenderness frees me from being an agent of condemnation or from asking the law to do what only grace can accomplish and motivates me to be a tool of that grace.

## 3) PASSION

No matter what is or isn't working in my ministry, no matter what difficulties or battles I am facing, the expansive glory of God gives me reason to get up in the morning and do what I have been gifted and called to do with enthusiasm, courage, and confidence. My joy isn't handcuffed to the surrounding circumstances or relationships; I don't have to have my heart yanked wherever they go. I have reason for joy because I am a chosen child and a conscripted servant of the King of kings and Lord of lords, the great Creator, the Savior, the sovereign, the victor, the one who does reign and will reign forever. He is my Father, my Savior, and my boss. He is ever near and ever faithful.

My passion for ministry is not about how I am being received; it flows out of the reality that I have been received by him. My enthusiasm is not because people like me, but because he has accepted and sent me. My passion is not the result of my ministry being as glorious as I thought it could be, but because he is eternally and unchangeably glorious. So I preach, teach, counsel, lead, and serve with a gospel passion that inspires and ignites the same in the people around me.

## 4) CONFIDENCE

The confidence, that inner sense of well-being and capability in ministry, is not untoward self-confidence but comes from a knowledge of whom I serve. He is my confidence and ability. He will not call me to a task without enabling me to do it. He has more zeal for the health of his church than I ever will. No one has more interest in the use of my gifts than the one who gave them. No one has more zeal for his glory than he does. He is ever-present and ever-willing. He is all-powerful and all-knowing. He is boundless in love and glorious in grace. He does not change, and he is faithful forever. His word will not cease to be true. His power to save will never be exhausted. His rule will not run out. He will never be conquered by one greater than he. I can do what I have been called to do with confidence, not because of who I am but because he is my Father, and he is glorious in every way.

## 5) DISCIPLINE

There are inglorious times in everyone's ministry. There are times when the naive expectations you have had of what it all would be like have proven to be just that—naive. There are passages of time when it's going to take more than ministry success and the appreciation of the people around you to pull you out of bed to do with discipline the things you have been called to do. There will be times when there seems to be little fruit as the result of your labors and little hope of that changing anytime soon. There are times when you will think you have been betrayed and you feel alone. So it is vital that your discipline is rooted in something deeper than a horizontal assessment of how things are going. I am more and more persuaded in my own life

that sturdy self-discipline, the kind that is essential in pastoral ministry, is rooted in worship. It is the awesome glory of God's existence, character, plan, presence, promises, and grace that gives me reason to work hard and not give up, no matter whether we are in a "good" season or one that is stormy.

#### 6) REST

Finally, as I face my own weaknesses and the messiness of the local church, what gives me rest of heart? It is glory that gives me rest. It is the knowledge that there is nothing too hard for the God whom I serve. It is the surety that all things are possible with him. It is knowing, with Abraham, that the One who made all those promises on which I base my ministry is faithful. There may seem to be many horizontal reasons to be anxious, but I will not let my heart be captured by worry or fear, because the God of inestimable glory who sent me has made this promise: "I will be with you." I don't have to play games with myself. I don't have to deny or minimize reality in order to feel okay, because he has invaded my existence with his glory, and I can rest, even in the brokenness between the already and the not yet.



#### **GETTING YOUR AWE BACK**

I don't have a set of strategies for you here. My counsel is to run now, run quickly, to your Father of awesome glory. Confess the offense of your boredom. Plead for eyes that are open to the 360-degree, 24/7 display of glory to which you have been blind. Determine to spend a certain portion of every day in meditating on his glory. Cry out for the help of others. And remind yourself to be thankful for Jesus, who offers you his grace even at those moments when that grace isn't nearly as valuable to you as it should be.