

MINISTRY

He . . . who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.

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I was in ministry, but I didn't really understand it. I didn't understand ministry because I didn't understand the people I was called to serve. I didn't understand the people I was called to serve because I didn't understand life in this terribly fallen world. Sure, I said and did helpful things. I endeavored to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to my people. I worked to counsel people with the wisdom that can only be found in God's Word, but my ministry was seriously lacking the big picture. I was doing all kinds of gospel stuff, but my ministry wasn't tied together by one central, unalterable, nonnegotiable mission. I was busy, but I didn't fully understand why.

I have met all kinds of ministry people all over the world who are just like I was. The problem is not that they're ungodly. The problem isn't that they lack pure motives. The problem isn't that they fail to do and say good things. The problem is that they lack the grand perspective, and because they do, they often lose sight of why they are doing everything they're doing.

Here's the danger: it is always easier for bad agendas to

slither their way into our hearts and into our ministries when we are unclear about the big, grand agenda that we are serving. You probably don't need me to tell you that people do ministry for all kinds of reasons other than the one grand agenda that should focus and direct every ministry activity. That was me. I didn't have the big picture, and because I didn't have the big picture, I was susceptible to being seduced by other ministry motivations. The problem was that I didn't know it.

I can't tell you how many times in my early days of ministry I questioned if God had really called me into pastoral ministry. It's embarrassing to admit how many times I decided to quit. I thought my problem was that I had been called to a difficult place. I reasoned that I had been sent to work with unusually resistant people. I envied the ministry of other people who seemed to have it better than me. I dreamed of a series of other jobs. I did a lot of moaning and complaining. I felt weak and unprepared. I knew something was wrong. I knew something was missing, but I simply had no clue what it was.

Then one day, in the mystery of God's loving and wise sovereignty, I bumped into Psalm 145, and it changed my life. No, it's not an exaggeration. It really did change me and everything about my ministry. And I have been living off those changes ever since. While I wish I could say that the battle is over for me, it's not; I've just become a more knowledgeable and committed soldier. Yet Psalm 145 gave me what I was so desperately missing: the big picture.

Ministry's Grand Agenda

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.

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.

It's all there. What I desperately needed and didn't see. It opens doors of thought, insight, and understanding. But it did more than that for me. It began to rescue me from me. Let me explain. I had read Psalm 145 many, many times. But this time, one single phrase that I had never noticed before hit me hard. I think it is the linchpin of the psalm. It's the door that leads you to what this psalm is about, what ministry is about, what life is about. I began to think that this psalm was getting my ministry where it needed to be; what was really happening was that God was getting to me. I am so thankful for that one little phrase. God used it as a tool to rescue the life of this man who had lost his ministry way.

"One generation shall commend your works to another" (v. 4). That was exactly what I needed. It immediately hit me that every moment of ministry must contribute to this goal. Whether it's the worship service, the children's lesson, the small group, or the sermon itself, each must share the central goal of holding the awesome glory of the works of the Lord before his people once again. God intends every moment of ministry to inspire awe of himself in his people. This must happen again and again and again. Why? Because we so easily become awe amnesiacs. We live between the "already"—Christ's completed and inaugurated work—and the "not yet"—the coming culmination of God's work of redemption. And since life in this period is

one big war over awe, the present generation of ministry people must give the next generation their awe of God.

You don't have to look very far to see awe problems everywhere around you. Adultery is an awe problem. To the degree that you forget God's glory as the Creator of your body and his place as owner of every aspect of your physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual personhood, to that degree it is easier to use the members of your body to get whatever pleasure your heart craves. Debt is an awe problem. When your mind is blown away by the thought that God provides everything you have, that every good gift really does come from him, you are predisposed to be a good steward of the things he has provided. Obsession with the collection of possessions is the result of an awe amnesia that makes you ask of things what you will only ever get from the God of glory, who alone can satisfy your searching heart. Living for power and control is an awe problem. When you live with the rest and peace that come from keeping the power, authority, and sovereignty of God before your eyes, you don't need to work yourself into control over the people and situations in your life. Gluttony and obesity are awe problems. When you forget the glory of the satisfying grace of the Redeemer, you are susceptible to letting things like food and drink become your temporary replacement messiahs. Fear of man is an awe problem. When I forget that God's glory defines not only him but who I have become as his child, I look to people to give me meaning, purpose, and identity. The awe war is everywhere.

So I know that in ministry I will be preaching, teaching, and encouraging people who are awe forgetful, awe discouraged, awe empty, awe deceived, awe seduced, awe kidnapped, and awe weary. My job is to give them eyes to see the awesome glory of God—his glorious grace, wisdom, power, faithfulness, sovereignty, patience, kindness, mercy, and love. Further, it is my job

to connect this glory to the everyday experience of the hearer in a way that engages the heart and transforms the life. Whatever the ministry moment or biblical passage being discussed, I am called to intentionally inspire awe.

Something is wrong with worship that fails to inspire awe. Something is defective in exegesis that does not inspire awe. Theological instruction that does not arouse awe is broken. Biblical literacy that fails to stimulate awe is missing something. When personal discipleship doesn't produce vertical awe, something is amiss. This is the grand agenda of every form of ministry, and once I got it, it set my ministry on a whole new trajectory—one on which it remains today.

We minister to people who are hardwired for awe, who have lost their awe, and who need awe given back to them again, so that they will not only live in awe of God but will pass that awe down to the generation that follows. Think about it. This is the job of parents, for example. You are called by God to inspire worshipful awe in your children. It is very hard for your children to get excited about God's rescuing grace and the life-directing commands of his Word if they have no awe whatsoever of the One who authored them both. You have been called to something that is profoundly deeper than being a lawgiver, a law enforcer, and a punishment deliverer. You are to exercise your authority in such a way that it gives your children eyes to see the awesome presence, power, authority, and grace of God. When our children are blown away by the glory of God, they will be predisposed to reach out for his grace and submit to his will.

The Lord's Prayer is a model for us here. The prayer that Jesus taught us to pray is an "awe prayer" before it is a "need prayer." From "Our Father" to "your will be done," the opening of this prayer presents a way of thinking, living, and approaching God inspired by awe of him. Only awe of him can define in you and

me a true sense of what we actually need. So many of our prayers are self-centered grocery lists of personal cravings that have no bigger agenda than to make our lives a little more comfortable. They tend to treat God more as our personal shopper than a holy and wise Father-King. Such prayers forget God's glory and long for a greater experience of the glories of the created world. They lack fear, reverence, wonder, and worship. They're more like pulling up the divine shopping site than bowing our knees in adoration and worship. They are motivated more by awe of ourselves and our pleasures than by a heart-rattling, satisfaction-producing awe of the Redeemer to whom we are praying.

Obviously, Christ's model prayer follows the right order. And it stands not only as a model for our personal prayer but for our ministries as well. It's only when my heart is captured by the awe of God that I will view my identity rightly. And it's only when I view my identity rightly that I will have a proper sense of need and a willingness to abandon my plan for the greater and more glorious plan of God. So in ministry we work to give sight to blind eyes, to reveal the glory that so many are missing, and to inspire awe in hearts whose capacity for awe is flaccid or has been kidnapped by some horizontal awe replacement.

Ministry's Personal Protection

I've written about this before, but it is important to emphasize it here. Only a functional, heart-directed, ministry-shaping awe of God has the power to protect me from myself in ministry. It is humbling to admit, but I have had to face the fact that the greatest danger to my ministry is me! The risk is that familiarity would cause me to lose my awe. Familiarity with God's glory is a wonderful gift of grace. To be called by God to stand up close to, think about, and communicate the elements of that glory to others is a privilege beyond expression. But it is also a very

dangerous thing because I very quickly replace any vacuum of awe of God in my heart with awe of myself.

I have seen it in my life and in the lives of many other people in ministry. When we replace awe of God with awe of self, we then permit ourselves to do things in ministry that no ministry person should do—to be controlling, authoritarian, self-righteous, theologically unteachable, defensive, isolated, and critical. We give way to thoughts, desires, and behaviors that are unbecoming of the gospel. We begin to think of ourselves as essentially different from the people we are called to serve. We allow ourselves to stand above the things that we teach. We begin in subtle ways to view ourselves as grace graduates. We explain away our sin and argue for our righteousness. We teach grace but are ungracious in meetings, with staff, and with our families. We approach ministry duties as a burden and not a joy. We allow ourselves to develop attitudes of bitterness and resentment against those we perceive to be our detractors. We preach and teach love, but we aren't examples of love.

Why does all this happen? The answer is simple, but it will sting you. It happens because we are full of ourselves. We have replaced awe of God with awe of self, and the harvest is not pretty. But awe of God protects you from these traps. Here's how:

1. *Your ministry is supposed to be shaped by the fear of God.* Ministry is always shaped by some kind of fear. If it is not shaped, motivated, and directed by fear of God, it will be shaped by fear of man, fear of circumstances, fear of the future, fear that you're not really called, fear of the tensions between family and ministry, or fear of financial woes. Only when the fear of God has captured my heart am I free of being dominated and paralyzed by the myriad of other ministry temptations.

2. *In ministry you are supposed to feel small, weak, and unable.* I did very well in seminary, so I graduated with a bring-

on-the-world-I'm-more-than-ready attitude. I was arrogant and self-assured. I had the mentality more of a messiah than a servant. Was I ever headed for a rude awakening! None of the people I was called to serve saw me as the messiah that I thought I was. I made just about every mistake a young pastor could make precisely because I was so scarily self-assured.

You see, awe of God will make you feel small, and that is good because that is what you and I are. Awe of God will make you feel unworthy for the task. It will confront you with a healthy inability. Not only does that sense produce a trust in God's wisdom, power, and grace, it also makes you humble, approachable, patient, kind, passionate, and willing. When you are blown away by the glory of the Savior and his cross, you will be driven to that cross for the character and strength you need to represent the Savior well in the lives of those around you. You won't be so quick to pontificate. You will be quick to admit your need. You will be obsessed not by how much people respect you, but by how much they worship their Redeemer. Fear is only ever defeated by fear. Only awe of God can ever rob horizontal awe of its power. Awe of God puts you in your place in ministry, and it will keep you there. Once you know who God is and rightly assess who you are, you will be able to minister with humility, hope, and courage.

3. *Ministry is meant to be something bigger than completing a list of tasks.* It is so easy for ministry to be reduced to a series of repetitive duties. It is so easy to lose sight of the big picture. It is easier than we think to lose sight of the awesome God we serve in the middle of days, weeks, and months of ministry busyness. It is tempting to reduce ministry to strategic planning, budget initiative, leadership development, property management, and the revolving catalog of essential meetings. And we can quickly forget why we are doing all the things we are doing.

You have been called to the high position of making the invisible glory of God visible to people who quickly lose sight of God's glory and begin to look for glories elsewhere. You could not wish to be part of something more important than this. A vision of God's glory must fuel and protect all our strategic planning. Worship, not success or an obsession with growth, must drive all our decisions about finances and property. Developing leaders is not just downloading theological knowledge and ministry skill, but calling people to lead with hearts captured by the awe of God. A person in ministry who wakes up every morning to the burdens of a job description and not to the joy of God's awesome glory is a ministry person in trouble.

4. *The spiritual warfare of ministry is all about awe.* The big ongoing battle in ministry is not a battle of time, finances, leadership, or strategy. The big battle is a battle of awe. The fear of man that grips so many ministry people and produces in them timidity and compromise is an awe problem. Sleep interrupted by anxiety about the finances of the church is an awe problem. Being too ruled and controlled by your own plan for the church is an awe problem. Being too conscious of how people see and respond to you is an awe problem. Settling for ministry mediocrity is an awe problem. Being too dominant and controlling in your ministry is an awe problem. Being self-righteous and defensive is an awe problem. Living in isolation, afraid of being known, is an awe problem. Arrogant theological "always-rightism" is an awe problem. Only awe of God can produce that balance between humility and boldness that marks all successful ministries.

5. *Awe of God is the only lens through which we can see ministry successes and hardships accurately.* Only when I look at the unavoidable hardships of daily ministry through the lens of the glory of God's sovereignty, grace, wisdom, power, faith-

fulness, mercy, and love will I ever see my ministry accurately. If I am comparing the size of my ministry difficulties to the limited resources of my wisdom, righteousness, and strength, I am making that comparison because I am a functional awe amnesiac. Here's the reality in which all ministry takes place: the God of inconceivable glory who has sent me never sends me to do his work without going with me. I am never alone in any ministry moment, never left to myself on the field of spiritual battle.

6. *Your ministry lifestyle always reveals what has captured your awe.* It really is true that a person's ministry is never shaped just by knowledge, experience, and skill but by the true condition of one's heart. In this way, all ministry ends up exposing the heart. Perhaps I am experiencing tension between my family and ministry because my heart has been captured by the awe of ministry success and, since it has, I have become a ministry workaholic. This heart condition means that, when I must choose between ministry and family, ministry will always win. Or maybe my heart has been captured by the awe of power, and the result is that I am domineering and controlling. Or it could be that my heart is captured by the respect of others, and because it is, I am tempted to compromise in places where God calls me to stand strong. Awe of something will always shape your ministry. Your ministry will only ever be protected when it is kept safe and pure by a heart-controlling awe of God and his holy glory.

7. *Finally, here's the battle, the big bad danger that lurks in the shadows of the life of every ministry person: familiarity.* Familiarity tends to blind our eyes and dull our senses. What once produced awe in us now barely gets our attention. This is the great danger in gospel ministry. So you must commit yourself to being humbly vigilant. You must start every day focusing the eyes of your heart on the stunning glory of God and his amaz-

ing, life-transforming grace. You must resist allowing familiarity to replace divine glory with the ministry mundane.

Yes, we all face a day-to-day battle for awe in ministry. But we are not alone. The God of awesome grace whom we serve is a God not only of past and future grace but of present grace as well. His present grace does for you what you cannot do for yourself; it rescues you from you. His grace protects you from the dullness and fickleness of your affections. His grace opens blind eyes and recaptures straying hearts. True hope for all our ministries is found in the unrelenting zeal of his right-here, right-now grace.