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Awe

*You are beautiful beyond description.
Too marvelous for words;
Too wonderful for comprehension.
Like nothing ever seen or heard.
Who can grasp your infinite wisdom?
Who can grasp the depth of your love?
You are beautiful beyond description,
Majesty enthroned above.*

*And I stand, I stand in awe of you,
Holy God, to whom all praise is due
I stand in awe of you.*

In our previous newsletters I have discussed the role emotion plays in our spiritual lives. I wish to continue this theme because I believe it is important that we fully understand that our relationship with God provides much pleasure. Pleasure is always emotional.

I reiterate that there are twelve emotions -- nine unpleasant and three pleasant. Love is the primary emotion experienced in our relationship with God, but joy and awe are frequently experienced. In this letter I will speak of awe, in the next I will write of joy.

Awe is defined in the standard dictionary as a mixture of dread, veneration and wonder inspired by authority, or by the sacred or sublime. I do not agree with this. In my observations on emotion, I am convinced that awe does not have a component of dread. For me, awe is the emotion that most commonly arises out of the appreciation of beauty. This can be in nature, in music or in art. It is the emotion of aesthetics. I can understand the reason for including dread in the definition. We often stand in awe during a thunderstorm, or seeing great power being demonstrated such as when the space shuttle is launched. If dread is present, it is because of a lack of understanding of the origin of that which we are seeing.

Primitive man lived in fear of the power of nature. Because he was helpless to defend himself from the ravages of nature he would be terrified by storms, or tornadoes or hurricanes, still he saw them with awe too. He could not control these natural phenomenon and did not know how to protect himself from them. Since his gods (spirits) were in these powerful phenomenon, his religion was one

of fear. We can see this in the Old Testament. God was not only awesome but wrathful. Moses and David had the right idea about his love, but the general public did not. Even though they knew He loved them they dreaded Him because of his expected retribution for their sinfulness. Indeed they had good reason to experience dread. They were sinful and chased after other gods who encouraged their sinfulness even though he had warned them of the consequences. The consequences were often exacted in natural phenomena. God used an earthquake and fire to punish the persons who challenged Moses' leadership (Num. 16:1-50). In Deuteronomy 28 God promised drought, diseases of all kinds, sterility of their animals and in their marriages. In addition, God spoke to Job out of the storm. God then enumerated the evidences of the power of his creation. It is no wonder then that dread (fear) was mixed with awe. But Christ's revelation of God's love changed all of that. I do not consider God's creation of nature and its actions now as being specifically sent for retribution for our sinfulness. After all, the Bible says He makes it rain on the just and the unjust. I do not have to dread him.

That dread does not have to be mixed with awe. I cite as an example our experiences during a hurricane when we lived on the gulf coast of Texas. Elizabeth, my wife called me at work and told me that a hurricane was to hit us that evening. When I left for work that morning there was no mention of a hurricane in the morning weather report. Still, I believed her so I left work and went home early. There was no time to prepare for the hurricane because the winds were increasing and it was beginning to rain as I drove home. The lumber companies were closed so I could not get plywood to board up our patio door. By six o'clock the winds were blowing 40 miles an hour, at seven 50, at eight 90 and by midnight they were 120 mph. Water was blowing in around our windows. Our patio door would bend in about an inch with wind gusts. We mopped and wrung out towels until about 4 AM, then it began to die down. In a few hours it was all gone. We were surrounded by a sea of water. It had rained 15 inches during the night and the drainage ditches could not handle it. I launched my boat in the street and rode all over town.. Our house fortunately did not have water in it, but we were some of the few in town that remained dry. I have to say that even though I was a pagan at the time I did not feel dread. I was **awed** by the storm. I was acutely aware of its power, but I was not afraid.

Having defined awe, let us turn to the Bible for it contains the scriptural truths that will help us understand the role of awe in our lives. The first mention of awe in the Bible is in 1 Samuel 12:12-18. Here the Israelites have asked for a king. Samuel tells them that since God is their king they do not need one. They still demanded one so Samuel says that to demonstrate God's displeasure a thunderstorm will occur. This was bad because it was harvest time. When the storm came, "The people stood in awe of God and Samuel." Interestingly Samuel tells them not to be afraid. This tells us that the awe experienced by the people was a mixture of fear and awe. Their fear arose out of their sin. The second mention of awe occurs in the story of the two women who had children. The child

of one of the women died, so she took the baby that another woman had borne. In the dispute that followed they ended up before King Solomon. He resolved the dispute by offering to cut the baby in half and giving each woman a share. The real mother said no, give it to the other woman. Solomon gave the baby to the woman who did not want the baby killed. "When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held him in **awe**, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice." There was no dread in this awe. In Jeremiah 33, he prophesies that when God has done great things for Jerusalem the nations will stand in awe of him. In Job we are told that dominion and awe belong to God because he establishes order in the heavens. In our era it is this awe that made Herbert Spencer say, "no man can contemplate the universe and not believe in God." It is this awe that makes astrophysicists of today refer to God as its creator.

David who related to God in a way that few men of his time did, said that he stood in awe of God's laws. He clearly saw and understood the wisdom in those laws. If we really contemplate God's laws, we realize that they are designed to bring the greatest good to the individual and mankind. No man could have decreed laws such as His. The question that the song asks, "Who can grasp his infinite wisdom?" is a great truth.

The events surrounding John the Baptist's birth evoked great awe in the people who witnessed his circumcision and naming. Early in Jesus' career he healed a man who was paralyzed. When he did so by forgiving the man's sins the Pharisees said he was blaspheming. They thought only God could forgive sins. Jesus knew what they were thinking so he made it plain that he had the authority of God to forgive sins. The people stood in awe of his possession of such authority.

Paul said, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse (Rom. 1:20). If this is so, I ask, have you ever stood on top of an 11,000 foot mountain in the Sierras and seen forever? The world seems so great and we seem so insignificant. The entire scene is colored with a purple haze. As far as you can see on all sides there are other mountain tops. If you have, you have felt awe. Have you ever seen the Cape Cod peninsula from 40,000 feet in the air with the setting sun painting the sea with gold? If you have, you have felt awe. Have you ever listened to Beethoven's 9th (Eroica) symphony? If you appreciate great music, you felt awed. Do you stand transfixed as you watch an approaching thunderstorm? Have you ever examined the complexity of a single cell and seen the extraordinary complexity of the nucleus and cytoplasm and all of the other organelles that reside there doing their job to make you what you are? If you have, you have felt awe. Have you ever thought about thinking? If you have, you could have felt awe. Have you ever contemplated the universe and considered its magnitude? Have you asked how far is a light year? What is a galaxy? How

many stars reside in each galaxy? How many are there in the universe? If you have done any of these things, you should have been awed. It is no wonder that Paul said we understand his divine power and eternal nature in the things he has made. They could not have happened by accident. The universe and all that is in it is a great thought (Heisenberg). It could not have created itself out of nothing. Man is not an accident, neither is the world in which he lives. There is a God and when we contemplate his creativeness, divinity, goodness, and above all his holiness, we are filled with awe.

As an emotion awe moves us. No! it really does not move us, it transfixes us. We are stilled with our eyes fixed and our ears open to incorporate and appreciate the marvelous sights and sounds that we are sensing. Our mind is completely focused on the sensory impressions. When we realize that he has created all of this and given us the ability to experience it, we stand in awe of Him. But there is more. God's love is awe inspiring. When his Spirit joins our spirit and we experience the infinite love that he has for us we not only respond with love, but when we later realize its magnitude we are awed. We don't deserve such love, yet he has freely given it to us. Are you not awed by the price he had to pay to give us this? I am!

Going back to the song we quoted there were words in the song that bothered me.. I did not understand, "You are beautiful beyond description," and "majesty enthroned above" If Jesus is the visible evidence of the invisible God how could Isaiah say "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." How can it be then that we should call him beautiful or majestic? Yet throughout our hymnody, God is referred to as beautiful and majestic. A contemporary song "Majesty" tells us to worship His majesty. The definition of the word majesty is "sovereign power, authority, or dignity". Certainly Jesus had sovereign power. He healed with it and raised the dead. Certainly he had authority. He taught with it. Early in his ministry he said that not everyone who said Lord, Lord would enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who obeyed God's word would be let in . He further said that a man who obeyed His words was like a man who built his house on rock. It could withstand the storms. But the one who did not listen to them and obey them was like a man who built his house on sand. The storms would destroy it. "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed (awed) at his teaching, because he taught as one who had **authority**, and not as their teachers of the law (Matt. 7:19-29). Finally Jesus had dignity. He dealt with the Sanhedrin and Pilate with dignity. Even though he was being abused, he still maintained his dignity.

I have to presume that Isaiah said what he said because he was talking about Jesus before the people of his day and those of ours encountered him and knew who he was. Once we have had a radical encounter with Jesus we can see his beauty and majesty. We do not have to see him with our eyes, hear him with our ears or touch him with our hands. All we have to do is believe and we will be able

to appreciate his beauty and majesty. He told us we would be blessed when we see him. He told his disciples "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." We are the ones who have not seen Him, therefore, our concept of his majesty is based on the witness of those who did see and hear him, and their record of his words and deeds recorded in the Bible. When we add our experience to His relationship with us after our own radical encounter with him, we can appreciate his beauty and majesty.

Awe is the emotional part of amazement and wonder. These words are used often to describe the reaction of people to the things Jesus said and did. When he calmed the storm his disciples were amazed (Matt 8:31). They were amazed at his teachings (Matt. 13:54). They were amazed when he drove out demons, when the mute spoke, when the lame walked and when the blind could see when he healed them (Matt. 15:31). They were amazed by his wisdom when he taught and again when he forgave sin. Although the Bible does not say so explicitly, I am sure that people were amazed when Jesus raised the dead. Our God is an awesome God. Throughout all time those who have heard his words and observed his works have stood in awe of Him. There was only one time when Jesus filled people with wonder. It had to do with the epileptic boy who the disciples could not heal. Just seeing him arrive on the scene filled them with wonder.

Do we get chances to be awed by God's works today? Yes we do. When I was a medical student and intern I was awed by the birth of a child. I did not know or believe that God had designed the creation of another person at that stage of my life, but I was still awed by its occurrence. I am always awed by the conversion of a sinner. God makes a new person before my eyes. What a mighty work! How blessed am I to be able to lead that person to Jesus. I am awed when I realize that I have been given so great a privilege. As I write this I feel awed. In the last three weeks I have had the privilege of leading three persons to Jesus. What joy and what awe I have experienced!

Several years ago I was present when Reinhard Bohnke preached at a major national convention. He gave an invitation to accept Christ at the end of his sermon and several thousand Roman Catholic priests and nuns stood up to indicate that they wished to give their lives to Christ. He could not believe what he saw, so he asked them if they had heard him correctly. He then told them that if they misunderstood they should sit down. No one sat down. They all, along with several hundred others, accepted Christ. We sat in awe of what God had done. When he had a healing service after the meeting, the blind saw and the lame walked. Again we were awed. Miracles still happen today. We are still awed by them.

Our God is an awesome God,
He reigns in heaven above,

With wisdom, power and love
Our God is an awesome God.