

Days of Awe
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On Wednesday nights we've been in a study of the Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith. One of the things we've studied is the 7 feasts that God required Israel to celebrate every year.

A couple of weeks ago Pat Hunter taught on the high holy days being celebrated this month on the Jewish calendar. He mentioned something called the Days of Awe and that really stuck with me. I had never really studied that before.

The first of the Fall Feasts is the Feast of Trumpets. Jewish people commonly refer to this feast as Rosh Hashanah, which literally means "beginning of the year." It is the Jewish New Year's Day. Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of a 10-day period during which God's people enter into self-examination and repentance, known as the 10 Days of Awe, which conclude on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

The Day of Atonement is a day of fasting and repentance. On that day in Old Testament times, the high Priest would go behind the veil into the Holy of Holies. He would atone for the sins of the nation by sprinkling blood on the Mercy Seat – which was the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. Everything about that points to Christ.

The Days of Awe are a time of repentance, reconciliation and restoration. During this time, it is believed that God withdraws His presence in order to create a hunger in the hearts of His people so that they will abandon all else in pursuit of Him.

This fascinates me and it got me thinking about the awe of God. So I'm preaching a message today called Days of Awe. And for believers in Jesus Christ – every day should be a day of awe! Way too many people have never had or have lost the awe of God. To us awe means "wonder, amazement, respect and admiration." And that's true. But if you look up the word awe in a dictionary it will define awe as, "a very strong feeling of wonder, reverence, or fear, caused by something grand or powerful."

The word awe comes from an Old Norse word meaning "fear, terror, great reverence." We seem to have lost that part of the meaning of awe. An example would be in ancient times when people were ruled by kings. It was an awesome thing to go into the presence of the king. It inspired fear because he had the power of life or death in his hands.

Think about the story of Queen Esther in the Bible. An evil man named Haman had tricked the king into killing all Jews.

Esther's uncle, Mordechai, told Esther that she needed to go to the king and get this changed or they would all die. However, there was a problem. There was a standing order that anybody who approached the King without first being summoned was to be killed immediately. Even the Queen could not just go before the King unless he called her. There was only one exception to this. If the King held out his golden scepter it was a signal to allow the person to approach.

Here is Esther's reply to Mordechai in Esther 4:16-

Go, gather all the Jews and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!

Most of you already know that the story ends well. God gave Esther favor with the King. What would have been a horrific disaster turned into a great victory for the people of God. But my point in telling you this is to show that in biblical times it was an awesome, fearful thing to approach a king. And Revelation 19:16 says Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! He is worthy of reverence and awe!

We all need a revelation of God as Father and Jesus as our friend. But that needs to be balanced with the revelation of Jesus as Lord! Some people teach grace out of balance where God is just someone who puts up with anything from anyone. But God hates anything that's out of balance. Proverbs 11:1 says:

A false balance is abomination to the Lord.

Now – I know that the literal meaning here is about an actual scale that when out of balance could be used to cheat others. But I'm applying this to our personal lives when we are out of balance because we put so much emphasis on one area of life that we cheat the other areas of life. God does not want us to live our lives out of balance because it hurts us. How can we be out of balance? So many ways. For instance: God created us - Spirit – soul – body – and we can get out of balance by emphasizing one to the detriment of others. 1 Thessalonians 5:23 says:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If God cares about our entire being, spirit, soul and body – then we should care about our entire being. Yes – certain parts are more important in an eternal sense. 1 Timothy 4:8 says:

For bodily exercise profits a little, but training for godliness is profitable for all things, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come.

In other words, physical exercise is of value while we are on earth, but

spiritual exercise has eternal value. We should prioritize the spiritual over the physical – but we should neglect neither.

This makes me think of some guys who only work out certain parts of their body and ignore others. As a result they have huge arms and upper body, but their legs look like toothpicks. They are out of balance. Many of us are like that. Parts of our lives are overemphasized, but others are neglected.

- Some people take care of business and let their house go – some people take care of their house and not their work so their work lets them go.
- Some people exercise their bodies but not their faith and they have no strength in a tough time.
- Some exercise their faith and not their bodies and they die long before their time.
- Some people take care of their money and ignore their spirit and their spirit gets possessed.
- Some people take care of their spirit and not their money and their car gets repossessed.

My point is that when we are out of balance, it will affect all areas of life. It's like having a tire on your car that's out of balance. It makes the whole car shake. So if there's a whole lot of shaking going on in your life – you might want to see if anything's out of balance.

Another way we can get out of balance is doctrinally. People can get an unbalanced view of the character of God by taking one aspect of God's character and emphasizing it to the exclusion of others. You should not take one of God's attributes and make that the totality of who He is. If you do that you have an unbalanced view of God.

Some people's definition of God only includes His attributes like love, goodness, grace and mercy. Many people want to live like they want to and serve a God who makes no demands on them. They want to sin with no consequences because "God is a God of love."

The other extreme is people who live with an unwholesome fear of God. They seem Him as mean and unbending and just waiting for an opportunity to punish them. This is legalism.

Both these extremes are wrong. What's the balance? Romans 11:22 says:

Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness.

The Message Version says:

Make sure you stay alert to these qualities of gentle kindness and ruthless severity that exist side by side in God...

In other words, we need an understanding of both the love of God and the judgment of God – or we will end up with a wrong view of God. We need balance. And when it comes to God – we must balance two very different aspects of His nature: the immanence of God and the transcendence of God.

Immanence means the nearness of God. That nearness means that He is accessible and approachable. Transcendence means that He is above everything else. After all, God is the Creator and the Creator is greater than His creation!

So – the balance is that God is far above everything – but He is as near as our breath! God dwells in unapproachable light – but His Spirit lives within us! God calls us His friend – but He is also the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Immanence without transcendence results in overfamiliarity with God where you treat Him like a buddy and you have no awe of God at all. Transcendence without immanence results in a distant relationship with God where you never get up close and personal.

Historically, people focused more on the transcendence of God. For 1500 years before Christ until 1500 years after Christ, faith and worship was centered on God's awesome transcendence. This started in the time of Moses. When God appeared to the Children of Israel at Mt. Sinai it was in all His majestic awesomeness! Exodus 20:18-21 says:

When the people heard the thunder and the loud blast of the ram's horn, and when they saw the flashes of lightning and the smoke billowing from the mountain, they stood at a distance, trembling with fear. And they said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen. But don't let God speak directly to us, or we will die!" "Don't be afraid," Moses answered them, "for God has come in this way to test you, and so that your fear of Him will keep you from sinning!" As the people stood in the distance, Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.

This distance from God continued when Moses would go into the Tent of Meeting – where anyone could go to inquire of God – but the people watched from afar. Then when the tabernacle of Moses was built – only the High Priest could go into the Holy of Holies where God's presence dwelt.

According to the Hebrew Talmud, the High Priest wore a rope around his waist as he made his way into the holy of holies. Why? So they could drag him out in case he died! There was a real concern about surviving a direct encounter with a holy God.

An overemphasis on the transcendence of God continued in history. By the time Martin Luther began the Reformation in 1517, the Roman Catholic church had been conducting masses in Latin for 500 years. No one other than the priests even understood what was being said in church! The people were not allowed to have Bibles of their own. The priests chanted in Latin, lit candles, waved censers of smoke and led worship from behind screens that separated them from the

people. To the people in those churches – everything about God seemed majestic, yet distant, unapproachable and not understandable. Transcendence was emphasized to the exclusion of immanence!

The Reformers wanted to change all that! They smashed statues of the saints and took down the screens that separated priests from the people. They translated the Bible into the language the people understood. They preached in their native language! And they preached salvation by grace, not by works. They literally turned centuries of church practice upside down by emphasizing not only the transcendent awe of God, but the immanent accessibility of God.

Unfortunately, in recent years, many churches have gone to the extreme of overemphasizing immanent friendship with God. In the attempt to make Jesus seem more approachable, they have lost the sense of awe and greatness of God.

We must be careful not to embrace the grace of God at the expense of His greatness!

We must not embrace the mercy of God at the expense of His majesty!

We must not embrace the love of God at the expense of His Lordship!

We must not embrace the kindness of God apart from His Kingship!

One of the most striking images of Jesus is found in John's Revelation. Think about this – John called himself “the disciple Jesus loved.” Now – Jesus loved them all – but Jesus and John had a very close relationship. For instance, at the last supper, John 13:23 says:

One of His disciples, the one Jesus loved, was reclining close beside Jesus.

Obviously, John had a very close relationship with Jesus. But when the risen Christ appeared to John on the Isle of Patmos, it wasn't the kind of meeting you'd expect from two close friends. Revelation 1:12-18 says:

Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.

And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore.”

In the past, John had experienced the immanent presence of Jesus as his loving friend. Now – he experienced the majestic transcendence of the risen Lord!

And what did he do? Fell at His feet.

By the way – in the Bible when people praise – they jump and shout and sing. But almost every time someone worshipped – they fell on their face. That happened throughout the Old Testament and it happened in the New Testament from the time the wise men fell down and worshipped the infant Christ to the time John fell down and worshipped the risen Christ! You'll find that all the way through the Bible- when people worship they fall down! And it's happening in heaven right now! Revelation 4:9-11 says:

Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created."

You see there's a time for singing – shouting – dancing and clapping. But there's a time when the only appropriate response is to fall at the feet of Jesus and worship Him. Why fall down? Because true worship acknowledges that Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and He is worthy of our obedience and submission. That's why Psalm 95:6 tells us:

O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our maker.

The Biblical words for worship mean to fall down, to bow down in reverence, to humble yourself, to adore. Worship requires reverence, humility, awe and adoration.

If you lose your awe of God – you will not worship deeply. So, how to we acquire the awe of God? By constantly practicing the presence of God. By choosing to see God in everything everyday so we live in days of awe.

When Jacob had a revelation of God in a dream, Genesis 28:16-17 says:

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

And we all experience times when we lose the awareness of God's awesome presence. So, we must choose to see God's awesomeness every day in everything! Psalm 19:1-2 says:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

Think about this – that was written in a time when people could only see stars with the naked eye. The most ancient catalog of stars was written around 150 AD by an Egyptian named Ptolemy who counted 1,028 stars in the sky.

That was the standard star catalog for 1,500 years. Galileo invented the telescope in 1609 and he could see 200,000 stars. Telescopes became bigger and we could eventually see 1.5 billion stars. Now, the largest telescopes on land show us 1 billion galaxies, each containing about 100 billion stars. The Hubble telescope – which orbits the earth – allows us to see 200 billion galaxies, each containing 200 billion stars.

So, the total number of stars in these galaxies adds up to about 50 billion trillion. If people in Bible times were in awe of God because of 1,000 stars – how much more awe should we have because we see trillions! We live in days of awe because the works of God in creation reveal His awesomeness. Habakkuk 3:2 says:

Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord.

We acquire the awe of God from His word that reveals His awesomeness. Psalm 119:120 says:

My flesh trembles in fear of You; I stand in awe of Your laws.

Revelation of God results in awe of God and awe of God always results in worship of God! When Jesus healed a paralyzed man, Matthew 9:8 says:

When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men.

Hebrews 12:28-29 says:

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

How do you know you have awe for God? You worship Him no matter what because everyday is a day of awe!

- On good days you worship God because you're in awe of His goodness.
- On bad days you worship God because you're in awe of the way He works all things out for your good!
- Even on days when the enemy attacks – you're in awe of God because what the enemy means for your harm – God turns for your good!

That's how awesome our God is. He takes bad things and turns them for good!

- What the enemy means for harm – God can disarm!
- What the enemy wants to steal – God can heal!
- What the enemy wants to destroy – God can redeploy!

So – no matter what you're doing through – every day is a day of awe because our great and awesome God is always with us!