

THE AWE OF GOD

The first time I can remember experiencing awe was in July of 1968. My husband and I, along with our five young children, were in the midst of a three-week trip across the United States and were now heading toward the Grand Canyon. I was sitting up high on the passenger side of our Dodge van, while my husband was driving (fortunately!) as we neared the canyon. All of a sudden, as I looked straight ahead, it seemed to me that nothing more was there, as if we were at the end of the earth with only a vast empty expanse ahead. I was terribly frightened! I wanted to say, "Stop! We'll fall off the earth and be destroyed!" but, of course, I didn't, for my mind knew that wasn't true.

Is this what awe is? I wondered. Does it have in it an element of "being afraid"? I had always taught the opposite. The "fear of the Lord" means reverence and respect for God, I believed, but we do not have to be afraid of Him, for He is our loving Father, I told my students. Now here I was confronted with something intangible, an emptiness, something new and different from anything I had experienced before, and for which all the photographs of the canyon that I had viewed through the years had left me unprepared, and my response was to be afraid. Was it due to the "bigness" of the expanse ahead or was it the unexpectedness of it all? Was my God so small or so predictable that I had never connected the same fear with him?

After we parked our van and walked to the edge of the Grand Canyon, I was no longer afraid. Now, instead, I could marvel at and enjoy its incredible beauty and vastness. It still had an element of danger to it, for anyone who disobeyed the safety precautions could be seriously injured or killed in a fall. It seemed sensible to obey the rules!

Seeing the canyon also brought up questions as to its origin. How did it get to be the way it is today? And when did it all happen? Did that river down in the bottom carve out this whole expanse? How long did it take? What makes the canyon so beautiful? So it is with many things: there is much beauty and mystery and challenge available to anyone who will come and see and think.

Long before the 1968 family vacation I had trained myself to think of God and Jesus Christ, no matter what I was experiencing at the time. So it was no surprise that I connected my God with what I felt and learned at the Grand Canyon. Even today I am still learning from that incident. God has taken me long distances from my home in New York to teach me some of my most valuable lessons. I believe He wanted me to have a tremendous object lesson and an emotional jolt as a jumpstart in a whole new level of relating to and teaching about Him. It worked!

With freshly opened spiritual eyes I could see that in God as well as the canyon there is beauty, and danger, and mystery, and vastness, and adventure, and enjoyment – and so much more, all there, waiting to be discovered. Seeing only one element of the whole can bring a distorted perspective to the mind. At the canyon, you have to move about to get a fuller idea of its beauty. God also needs to be seen from many different points of view, and even then, we will never be able to learn all there is to know about Him. But at the time, I set out to explore one "new" aspect of my God – the fact that He is BIG!

At the time I read a book by J. B. Phillips entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. I really enjoyed that book and have recommended it to others through the years. I felt that my God was

already big, and not small in the sense that Phillips describes. Then I began to notice and meditate on the word pictures in the Bible that describe God's bigness. How I enjoyed them! I will mention three, to give an idea of what I mean.

Oh, how I loved the passages in Isaiah 40 [read: Isaiah 40:12-18, 26, 28] that talk about God's hand – big enough to hold a whole ocean as he was measuring out the waters; big enough to mark off the heavens with a span; big enough to hold a scale on which he weighed the mountains and hills! If his *hand* is that big, how big is the rest of him?? Surely, in comparison, the nations *are* like a drop in a bucket, and if that is true, how big am I? I must be like a particle of dust from the earth, which he holds in a basket, according to verse 12. Surely he cannot be compared to anything! No one is even his *equal*! He is the Mighty Creator, the Holy One.

Of course, I knew that this passage from Isaiah was poetry, and the rules of poetry apply in its interpretation. I did not think God really stretched out the heavens like a canopy; in fact, I knew he did not really have literal hands! But to this day I thoroughly enjoy thinking over this wonderful chapter with the poetic images in my mind as if they really happened as stated.

The next image also comes from Isaiah, the vision that he had as recorded in chapter 6 [read: Isaiah 6:1-8]. He saw the Lord "seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple." The train of his robe! I thought of the train on a wedding gown and wondered: if a bride was walking down the aisle and the train of her robe *filled* the church, how would we feel? Could we even see high enough to glimpse her face? In fact, could she even fit into a church building? Might we be frightened? Who would want to, or dare to, marry her? Well, if God's train filled the whole *temple*, how big is he?? How can we not have some fear of him mixed in with our love and reverence? And how could we help but feel like guilty, dirty nothings in his holy, pure presence, like Isaiah did? And after being cleansed by him (imagine that!) how could we help but eagerly say, "Gladly, Lord" to anything he asked us to do for him? And how could that service be anything but a joy?

The third image comes from Acts 7:48-50, where Isaiah is being quoted in part: "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?' " I already knew from the above that God could not fit into any house, but now I relished the thought of his using the whole earth as a footstool! I would look "up" in awe and think: if God needs the whole earth as a place to rest His feet, how big is the rest of Him? Out of sight, of course. Awesome! And the complementary thought was also there: then how small are we? I could see that God is over all, and that our proper place is at His feet where we need to respect and honor Him, for He could so easily destroy us with one step.

Isaiah 8:13, 14 says, "The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary." And Hebrews 12:28b-29 says this: "Let us be thankful, and so worship him acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." God, who is holy, big, powerful, and awesome, offers to be a sanctuary – a place of safety and peace – for anyone who will trust in him. Isn't that amazing?

Well, you cannot have anything keep on getting bigger and bigger without something happening. Think of blowing up the biggest balloon imaginable. If you keep on filling it, sooner or later it will explode. That's what happened with my mental images of God. After a while, it seemed as if the huge picture completely disintegrated, and gently rained down over me until I was enveloped by God. Now God had become Spirit, which is exactly what Jesus said He was (John 4:24). Now I knew experientially what I had known as a fact for a long time: "In God we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Now God was all around me, able to hold my hand and be my constant companion and friend, while at the same time retaining the vastness that easily brings a lump to my throat whenever I think about it. Now I could enter into what King David and the other Psalmists said about God in their beautiful poetry: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And being with you, I desire nothing on earth. My heart and my flesh may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:25,26).

Yes, the things of earth were losing their appeal and my desire was to see God glorified in my life and in the lives of others, as together we walk on this earth toward our heavenly home. To those who were not yet believers, I wanted to present the good news that they could join the wonderful adventure of life by faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior. From the time I became a believer myself in the early 1950s my desire had never changed: To be what God wants me to be, and to do what he wants me to do. And he gave me plenty to do right where I lived.

That's why I was so surprised in 1995 when I was reading an advertisement for a women's conference to be held in Jerusalem – yes, Jerusalem, *Israel!* – and felt clearly that God wanted me to go there! I had not even desired to visit Israel. When I saw that we could go from there to Egypt, if we wished, I knew that God was making it possible for me to accept an invitation He had given me a year earlier, through an Egyptian Christian man, to visit and speak to the Christians in Cairo. What could I do but joyfully say Yes!?

Now here is where I can have a good laugh at myself, as I realize afresh how much I still have to learn: I really thought I was going to be in complete awe when the time came for me to see the pyramids! In my mind's eye they were so BIG that I would gaze up at them in open-mouthed wonder, astonished at how something so marvelous could have been constructed and have lasted all these years! Seeing the pyramids would surely be one of the highlights of my life!

But Israel came first. God had some big lessons to teach me before He had me see the pyramids. One was a confirmation of what I had thought: I would not be overwhelmed at being in the area where Jesus had lived. I knew that Jesus was close to me in New York, that I would not have to travel to Israel to "find" Him. While I would enjoy seeing the sights, I did not expect to be "impressed," for I remembered what Jesus had said when the disciples were exclaiming in awe about the massive stones and the magnificent buildings of the temple area (Mark 13:1,2). "Do you really think these buildings are impressive?" Jesus replied (my version). "Let me tell you something. In a few years they will all be destroyed. Those massive stones will all be knocked down into a heap. Don't be impressed by anything that is done by people, for it will not last." I stood by those massive stones, recently excavated by archaeologists in Jerusalem, and I was impressed by *God*, whose works are *eternal!*

Another lesson was that I must lay aside – put to death – my own plans and let God do with me whatever He wishes, in His own way. I had wanted so much to tell at least a part of my personal story in Jerusalem and felt clearly that God wanted me to speak at the conference. When it seemed that I would not get the chance, I determined to let go of my plans. After that, God did let me speak, in a way far greater than I could have guessed. He brought to my roommate and me a native Israeli man who was ready to be born spiritually and needed some help. What a joy to see this man go from turmoil to peace as he put his trust in Jesus Christ, his Messiah!

Then, too, God made it plain that He is still all-powerful, when He stopped our boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee – by moving into the path of the boat a floating island on which we got stuck! The sea is His; He made it. If He wants to calm the waves or walk on the sea, He will. If He wants a group of tired, busy American women to calm down and think of Him, He can stop the boat! And that's not the end of the story. Since we had some free time before another boat could come to rescue us, the directors of the conference let my roommate and me tell about our experience with the Israeli man. I have often wondered if that's why God stopped the boat!

After all this, and more, you would think I would have learned my lesson, but I still expected to be thrilled by the sights in Cairo. Well, I saw the Nile, and it was nothing more than a pretty river to me. I thought about how it had been turned into blood by God back in the days of the Exodus. How can you be impressed by something so obviously under the control of Someone Greater? And then, there they were, looming high over the surrounding buildings – the pyramids! We drove up closer, got out of the bus, and another woman and I walked up to one of them and touched it. But – there was no special thrill. The pyramids are man-made; they are crumbling; they will not last; actually, they are not even very attractive. AND – they are tombs! Places of death! Did God bring me on a six thousand mile trip just to let me know that awe of Him really does put all earthly things into perspective, to let me lose forever my awe of the pyramids or any other earthly thing I might think is – “Massive! Magnificent!”? He has done that a number of times before, and He may do it again!

Actually what happened was that the evening before I saw the pyramids I had spoken at a gathering of Christians in Cairo. I had listened to Arabic people singing praises to God in their language. I had heard their prayers and even prayed with some of them. I had felt their love and acceptance. I had seen THE CHURCH. I had been among LIVING STONES. Now *that* is awesome! God opened my eyes to the work only He can do, work that is ETERNAL! The impact of the pyramids was certainly diminished for me by the far superior spiritual sights that God had shown me on my trip.

I have come to see that the awe of God contains many more elements than wide-eyed wonder. It includes peace, contentment, stability, and a deep-seated joy. For with the awe of God, everything takes its proper place. Fear of people leaves when the fear of God is in our hearts. Boasting and pride in ourselves depart when we have Someone so much more wonderful to talk about. The list is endless! I expect that my own awe of God will keep on growing as God leads me through various experiences, until the day I wake up IN HIS PRESENCE! Then I will *really* know what AWE is! Praise God!