

In Awe: The Astonishing Goodness of God

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My wife, Amy, loves new experiences. In 2017 she convinced our family that we needed to travel five hours from Provo to eastern Idaho to see the full solar eclipse in person. We got organized and took off driving to the nearest zone of totality—the ideal place to observe a solar eclipse. We drove in bumper-to-bumper traffic along what are usually empty roads. We found what I am sure was the last parking spot in all of Idaho and then herded the kids past revelers who looked like they had been camped there for days or weeks. All I could think was, “Is this really worth it? We could have watched this online!”

We found a place to sit and squinted through our overpriced cardboard glasses as the partial eclipse began. Initially, I have to admit that I was pretty underwhelmed. But I watched and waited.

Suddenly the light around us began to change rapidly. The birds stopped chirping. The temperature dropped. The laughter, music, and talking all around us quieted. “It’s happening!” people

started to say out loud. The darkness deepened. We took off our cardboard glasses and stared upward, looking directly at the sun that was not there.

It is hard to describe what we saw. Even the most detailed pictures do not do it justice. What is more difficult to express is how I felt. I got goosebumps and found myself getting choked up. I stood there in the quiet darkness with my wife, my kids, and hundreds of onlookers—our eyes fixed on the sky—and marveled in awe at this remarkable heavenly expression. For one minute and forty-five seconds we stared in silent, reverent wonder.

I experienced something during the eclipse that I did not anticipate: a spiritual surprise, an unexpected connection to the divine.

The mood of the crowd was different as we walked quietly back toward the car. A couple stopped us and asked, “What did you think?” The woman’s eyes were still wet with tears. “Wasn’t it awesome?” she asked.

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Divine Awe

Awesome. We use that word a lot these days.

We use it to describe the taste of food: “That sandwich was awesome!”

We use it to acknowledge a gift or an act of service: “Hey, I got you that book; I’ll drop it by your apartment later tonight.” “Awesome!”

We use it to affirm that we are willing to do something: “Do you want to go to the devotional with me?” “Yeah, awesome!”

In fact, some people think everything is awesome!

Although we may overuse the word *awesome* and the way we use it in everyday talk may take away from its true meaning, the root of the word *awesome*—*awe*—is actually quite inspiring.

Today I am going to define *awe* as profound reverence, a personal and unexpected reaction to seeing God at work. It is seeing or witnessing something inspiring and feeling the Spirit touch our hearts to confirm truth, expand knowledge, or reaffirm heavenly love. It is the divine surprise I felt for those 105 seconds as we stood in the zone of totality of the solar eclipse.

Do you remember feeling a bit of God’s magnificence when perhaps you did not expect it?

Maybe when you experienced heart-stopping art.

Maybe when you looked into a microscope or a telescope and saw new worlds.

Maybe when you came to a critical point in a breathtaking piece of music.

Maybe when you finally grasped a complex idea with a flash of understanding.

These moments of surprise are manifestations of Heavenly Father’s love for us, His children. They are ways that God both connects with and nourishes us. Today I would like to help us find, recognize, and cherish awe in our lives, particularly when we are in a spiritual eclipse. I want us to come away from our time together ready to more regularly embrace the astonishing goodness that God offers us.

Experiences with awe change us. They cause us to ask questions and move us to learn. Awe is full of paradoxes. It invokes vastness and makes us feel small—we are nothing compared to God.

At the same time, awe makes us feel God’s power and love—we mean everything to God.

Maybe it’s been a long time since you have felt awe or have felt God in your life. Life’s busyness, coupled with discouragement, depression, anxiety, isolation, grief, and a host of other factors, can make it difficult to experience or to remember when you have felt awe. At times it can be hard to believe that you’ll ever experience something remarkable again.

During the solar eclipse, my moment of awe came after five hours of driving. Let me tell you about another experience with awe that was five years in the making and that came only after an eclipse of light and hope.

Distanced from Awe

In the late 1990s, my twenty-something self was all about pursuing my passions. After I had returned home from my mission in Paraguay, a study abroad in Mexico led me to change my major from biology to Spanish. I worked as a backcountry guide in the summer and a ski patroller in the winter. A mentor and I started two companies in the outdoor recreation industry. So naturally, when the time came to pursue a master’s degree, I chose parks, recreation, and tourism, with an emphasis in finance and marketing. Later, at the end of the 1990s, I worked in business development for a technology start-up. My life was busy and demanding, but it was also full of promise and always exciting.

Then things changed. In 2000, when the growth of all my business ventures was peaking, I began having impressions that I should return to school, complete a PhD, and, of all things, become a professor. I didn’t know anything about being a professor. But the impressions became clearer when I heard a talk by President Gordon B. Hinckley in which he counseled listeners to “get all of the education you can.”¹ In 2001, without really knowing what I was getting myself into, I left the technology company and the two start-ups I had cofounded. Amy and I packed up our things in a U-Haul truck and drove south, away from our families in Utah, to College Station, Texas—in the middle of a hot and sweaty August.

I started classes and quickly became overwhelmed. I questioned if I had made a mistake. I sat in my tiny, windowless office—hour after hour, with a foul-mouthed office mate—asking myself how I could run another regression, review another paper, or evaluate one more ridiculous theoretical puzzle assigned to me by my professors. I was surrounded by people who seemed much smarter and more capable than I was. I worried that someone was going to figure out that I didn't deserve to be there.

I remember writing my first academic paper. I spent days working to produce what I thought was a well-written manuscript. My professor returned the paper covered with red marks and critical comments. I walked outside to a wooded area near the business building. My hands crumpled the paper as I paced next to a small creek. I sobbed as I prayed out loud. I could not understand why God had prompted us to travel to this place only to let me fail.

I lay awake night after night contemplating how I would get out and how it all would end. I met with a counselor and tried medication to help. I even took up the habit of eating a huge bowl of Blue Bell ice cream every night—which did help a little! I prayed for answers, but none seemed to come. What was I to do?

Perhaps some of you can relate to feeling such despair. Maybe you're in a state of spiritual eclipse, where everything is dark and awe is absent. What can we do when God feels distant, even when we desperately need Him? I want to share three actions that have helped me when I have longed to feel a spiritual connection. I hope they will help you too.

Three Actions to Help You Feel a Spiritual Connection

1. Act so that we can believe.

Not believe then act. Not act as if we believe. But *act* so that we *can* believe.

For some people, believing is simple. Their beliefs and actions are so intertwined that they don't really see a difference. But for others of us—especially those of us who are trekking through our own wilderness or feeling estranged from God—acting takes every bit of faith we have.

In Texas, when everything seemed so hopeless to me, I dragged myself to sacrament meetings, fulfilled my callings, and kept praying for help—even though the heavens seemed closed. Those actions kept me in good places in the orbit of good people. They were my way of being faithful even though my path to future success felt tenuous. Rather than focusing on outcomes, which I mostly could not control, I spent time on inputs—the things I could control.

One day during my first October in graduate school, I was feeling particularly discouraged, unsuccessful, and marooned. The southern Texas weather was still balmy, and there were no colorful autumn vistas. I missed feeling the crisp air of a Utah fall and getting together with family for general conference.

Nothing felt awesome in Texas—not even my favorite hobbies. I had tried camping, but then I discovered fire ants. I had attempted kayaking in a river, but the signs warning of alligators scared me off. I was certain my life of pursuing my beloved passions was over. Forget about awesome—I longed for anything that just felt normal!

So between general conference sessions, Amy and I acted. We got on our bikes and rode, searching the neighborhoods and back roads in hopes that we might see some fall colors. We rode for over an hour and did not see a single autumn vista. Eventually we found ourselves down a beautiful, rural dirt road. Birds were chirping and toads were croaking under a vast Texas sky. We rounded a corner, and there it was: a tree with two branches of leaves that were turning color! They were mostly brown, not bright yellow or red, but it was something. It was a divine surprise. We cut off one of the small branches and placed it on our little kitchen table. It became a precious reminder to me that God was aware of my challenges and was giving me glimpses that He was there. While I did not find exactly what I was looking for that day, I received a reason to keep believing.

In Liberty Jail, at the height of the persecution of the early Church and in his own deep despair, Joseph Smith began to wonder if God would ever again intervene to succor the Saints. The Lord reminded the Prophet, “Let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and

then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed.”²

What is within your power right now? If you want to believe—in God, in the gospel, or in your future—act first, and then see what gets revealed.

2. *Recognize, remember, and record.*

To his followers, Alma said, “If ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?”³ Some of us might answer with a resounding yes! But many of us who have felt inspiration previously—maybe during childhood, adolescence, or while on a mission—struggle to feel it now. This is normal! Spiritual feelings come and go throughout our lives, just as light does throughout a year.

Remembering fortifies us. We can more fully appreciate times when God has spoken peace to us if we cast our minds back and recall those specific occasions when the Lord has spoken peace to our minds, as He did with Oliver Cowdery.⁴ Recognizing that God has made Himself known to us in the past gives us confidence that He will again in the future.

What might happen if we took a few more minutes each day to recognize, remember, and record when we have heard God’s voice in our lives—the way President Nelson has invited us to do?⁵ It is easy for me to say, “Spend time recognizing, remembering, and recording God’s hand in your life,” but where are you going to find the time? Well, I can give you some.

You weren’t expecting this, but maybe by doing something a little unusual—and at the risk of a bit of awkwardness—something surprising might happen for you, like it did for me during the solar eclipse.

Let’s temporarily put ourselves in a zone of totality. Thanks to the lighting crew, it’s going to get dark in here. Then, while we sit in the darkness, I am going to ask you some questions, and I invite you to recognize and remember the personal and unexpected ways that God is at work in your life right now.

While it’s getting dark, get comfortable in your seats. Let go of your phones and empty your laps. Put down your burdens for a minute.

Let’s pause and take a few deep breaths. I’m going to share a few words to help us consider some of God’s miracles that we may take for granted as ordinary.

Elder Lawrence E. Corbridge said:

*The most phenomenal occurrences of all time and eternity—the most amazing wonders, the most astounding, awesome developments—are the most common and widely recognized. They include: I am; you are; we are. . . . Is there anything greater than those ordinary realities? No. Nothing else even comes close. You can’t begin to imagine, much less describe, anything greater than what already is.*⁶

Now remember a time when you felt God in your life and were not expecting it. How did the divine touch your heart? Maybe you felt love or peace or joy. Relive that experience in your mind for a moment.

Where were you?

Why was it personally meaningful to you?

How did you suspect, or even know, that God had a hand in that experience?

In the zone of totality we can’t see the sun, but that does not change the fact that the sun is there. I know God is there. Always—even when we can’t see or feel the light of His love.

Tonight, or sometime in the next few days, will you take a moment to record your experience? Documenting the Lord’s hand in your life changes you; it makes you more aware and receptive to the reality that He delights in making Himself known to you.

Once you have done this, what can you do to consistently recognize, remember, and record God’s goodness in your life?

Thanks for doing that with me. I hope it wasn’t too weird. If it was, don’t worry. They only give us one shot at doing a devotional, so you’ll never have to go through that again.

What we did in this little exercise made a big difference for me when I was in Texas. It struck me hard when President Hinckley said to “get all of the education you can.” But the feeling dissipated over the years. During those dark and difficult times in my doctoral program, even when I couldn’t feel or see God’s influence in my life,

I reflected on that memory. And that memory gave me hope to keep going.

And now, to the third action.

3. *Seek thin places.*

Being in certain settings can also help us see glimpses of God's goodness. Drawing from an old Celtic expression, Sister Virginia H. Pearce, former counselor in the Young Women general presidency, suggested that some environments are "thin places": "A thin place is where, for a moment, the spiritual world and the natural world intersect" and "where we experience a deep sense of God's presence in our everyday world."⁷ Finding these places helps us hear the Lord and experience the surprising and personal insights He desires to share with us through the Spirit.

Years ago a student came to me in a panic. He had been unsettled for days about which of two job offers to accept. Rather than hash through the details, I suggested he go outside and walk around. It was a cool autumn day, and we all know how powerful fall colors can be! The following week he told me that just changing the scenery in his life opened him up to revelation he had not been able to access previously. It brought him to a "thin place" of awe and connection.

These thin places are going to be different for each person, but finding them involves being intentional about where you are and observant about what's happening when you're there.

For some, a situation or activity rather than a particular place is the doorway to awe. For me, riding my bike or hiking early in the morning, whether I am on slickrock or among pine needles, are activities that can put me in touch with the divine. Talking with good friends or being with family members also can be sacred situations.

Just think for a second, and I am confident you'll realize there are thin places, situations, or activities where you can find peace and access to the Spirit.

The Lord counseled the early Saints, "Stand ye in holy places."⁸ This guidance is as much about where our heart is as it is about where our feet are. Preparing the state of our heart when we enter thin places helps us be ready to experience divine

surprises of awe where we see how God's will can complement our own.

Where can you find thin places and activities that inspire you? Can you make a simple plan to go there this week?

Divine Surprise

The actions I have shared—acting, remembering, and seeking thin places—were important choices that I began to practice during my PhD program, even on the days when I felt numb to the Spirit and had a difficult time remembering what hopefulness felt like. But slowly, as I practiced them, things began to change. The awe returned and darkness began to give way to more light. I studied until my brain hurt and got better at understanding the material. My office mate and I began exercising together and became close friends. My grades improved, and I started to realize that I was capable of doing the work.

With one assurance after another, the Lord nudged me to continue on. I began to notice Him in the simple details of my everyday life, in things I had previously taken for granted or been unable to enjoy: my interactions with classmates and professors, my daily bike rides to and from school, Wednesday night activities with the youth in the ward, and the remarkable goodness of my wife, Amy, whose love and support was constant and whose faith was unwavering. All of these small miracles had been there from the beginning of my journey, but I hadn't been able to notice them.

I finished my PhD program, and nearly five years after beginning our adventure in Texas, I stood as a faculty member in front of my first class of students here at BYU—something I could never have imagined during that first semester of my doctoral program. After a student said an opening prayer, I had a distinct impression—a realization—that Heavenly Father had brought me to where I was. It was He who had made all of this happen as I gave my best efforts. This was truly a divine surprise.

Retrospective Awe

With God, something surprising is always in the making. The awe can come at a moment of peak joy, after toiling for years, or even in a

dark moment of loss. We often see the value of our experiences more clearly with the benefit of hindsight.

When Sariah, Lehi, and their family fled from Jerusalem, they saw glimpses of divine goodness as the Lord led them along the way. He said, “I will also be your light in the wilderness.”⁹ But the family did not fully appreciate the significance of the Lord’s role until the journey was over. “Yea, and the Lord said also that: *After ye have arrived in the promised land, ye shall know that I, the Lord, am God; and that I, the Lord, did deliver you from destruction.*”¹⁰ Just as with Sariah and Lehi, we may not fully realize “that it is by [God] that [we] are led”¹¹ until after we have traveled through the wilderness and have crossed the great waters.

Even when we have come out on the other side of those journeys, the difficulties don’t end! We all experience daily challenges, even at BYU! Often many of our greatest trials come as we strive to develop greater spiritual capacity. This is good news. Our most awesome blessings come through our greatest challenges—some of which we choose, some of which just happen, and some of which are forced upon us.

Embracing Zones of Totality

Let’s return to my experience at the solar eclipse. When my wife, Amy, decided to go see the eclipse and took us all with her, she put our whole family in the zone of totality. We were in a situation in which we had the potential to experience something unique. Although we did not set out to be spiritually uplifted, we did put in the effort to be there. But there also were people all across the United States who just happened to be living in the zone of totality and who experienced, unexpectedly, the wonder of that celestial event. Other people, like some of my kids that day, are dragged into the zone of totality by their family or other life events.

I’d like to suggest that when we are in these zones of totality, we can exercise trust that we will feel love, connection, and awe as we wait patiently to see the Lord’s hand revealed. The sun will shine again, and you will feel it in a totally new way.

God loves you and desires you to know Him. You are deserving of His love because of who you are. You qualify for His influence in your life because you are His child. He thinks you’re awesome! And because of this, you are deserving of wonder and awe—no strings attached.

Each time I stand in front of students at the beginning of a new semester, I try to remind myself of the awe I felt sixteen years ago in my first BYU classroom experience and how the sun broke through after a prolonged period of darkness. I love it here. What a privilege it is to be part of building the Lord’s kingdom through this remarkable institution. I love you and am in awe of you, dear students and dedicated and inspiring colleagues and friends.

“I Stand All Amazed”

The next time you use the word *awesome*, will you consider the personal and unexpected ways that God is at work in *your* life? And when you find yourself in a spiritual eclipse, watch and wait. Keep acting. Keep remembering. Keep seeking thin places. God is with us in the darkness and in the light.

Let me conclude with the greatest divine surprise of all. Our Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, so that we might return to live with our heavenly parents eternally. Think back to the musical number “I Stand All Amazed” that David Kime played so beautifully at the beginning of this devotional.

What fills me with profound awe is that our Brother Jesus Christ would be willing to “descend from his throne divine”¹² to suffer, bleed, and die to rescue rebellious souls like me and you. His sacrifice is “sufficient . . . to redeem, and to justify”¹³ *all* of humanity, and at the same time He succors you and me personally. That is truly awesome!

It is our Savior’s willingness to accompany each of us in our sorrows, our pains, and our infirmities that allows us to experience the astonishing goodness that our loving Heavenly Father earnestly offers to each of us. “Oh, it is wonderful that he should care for me Enough to die for me! Oh, it is wonderful, wonderful to me!”¹⁴ In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Converts and Young Men," *Ensign*, May 1997; see also Hinckley, "Inspirational Thoughts," *Ensign*, June 1999.
2. D&C 123:17.
3. Alma 5:26.
4. See D&C 6:22–23.
5. See Russell M. Nelson, "Hear Him," *Ensign*, May 2020.
6. Lawrence E. Corbridge, "Stand Forever," BYU devotional address, 22 January 2019.
7. Virginia H. Pearce, "Thin Places," BYU Women's Conference address, 1 May 2014.
8. D&C 87:8; see also D&C 45:32; 101:22.
9. 1 Nephi 17:13.
10. 1 Nephi 17:14; emphasis added.
11. 1 Nephi 17:13.
12. "I Stand All Amazed," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 193.
13. "I Stand All Amazed."
14. "I Stand All Amazed."