

Hope Versus Panic

It is quite clear that your view of God will inescapably shape your perspective on your circumstances. In this way your theology is like a lens through which you examine life. This means you never come at your circumstances from some happy place of neutrality. You and I are always evaluating our situation from the vantage point of vertical awe or awelessness. In some way, we, like the children of Israel, are always asking and answering five deeply theological questions, and the way that we answer them will push us toward hope or panic.

1. Is God good?

Now you can rest assured that the goodness of God will confuse you. You see, what looks good from God's perfect eternity-to-destiny perspective doesn't always seem good to us at ground level. It is hard to accept that God knows better than we do. It is hard to admit that God can use difficulties for good in our lives. When it comes to what is good, it is very hard for us to stay on God's agenda. And again the issue of awe lies at the heart of this. If I live at the center of my God-given capacity for awe—that is, if awe of self has replaced awe of God—then I will invariably conclude that God is not always good, and loads of complaints will follow.



If I am at the center, I will define good as what is comfortable, predictable, pleasurable, natural, and easy. The good life will be the easy life because awe of self will have replaced awe of God as the principal motivator of my life. So when difficulty comes my way, my default theological response will be to wonder why God is doing what he is doing and to question his goodness. In my early days of ministry, I was blown away by how many of the people whom I counseled were angry with God. I was amazed at how many people no longer assumed that God was good.

Now here's what's deadly about this. If you allow yourself to question God's goodness, you will quit following his commands, and you will quit running to him for help because you will no longer rely on, follow, or seek the help of someone you no longer trust. But God is good. His goodness is the foundation stone of his awesome qualities. He never thinks, desires, says, or does what is evil. He is the definition of all that is good, right, and true. Everything he does is good in every way. His goodness is so bright and glorious it should leave us breathless, silent, and amazed. And if we are amazed at his goodness, we won't panic in times of trouble, and we won't refuse to do the hard things he calls us to do.

Does awe of God's goodness interpret life for you? Or do the hardships of life cause you to question his goodness?

2. Will God do what he promised?

Few questions in life are more important than this one. Since we are all small and weak, since we never really know what is going to happen next, and since God calls us to do difficult, sacrificial things, we need to know that his promises are reliable. Will he be with us always? Will he give us everything we need? Will he forgive us no matter what? Will his love last forever? Will he stay with the work of his grace until that work is done? Will he provide the guidance and protection that we need? Will he?

God's promises are meant to move and motivate us. They are meant to instill hope. They are meant to give us courage. They are meant to defeat feelings of loneliness, inability, and fear. They are meant to give us peace when things around us are chaotic and confusing. God's promises are meant to blow your mind and settle your heart. They are his gifts of grace to you. In your heart of hearts, you know you could never have earned the riches that he pours down on you. His promises are meant to leave you in awe of him and in wonder at the glory of his grace. His promises are designed to be the way that you interpret and make sense of your life.

Do you stand with hope and courage on the awesome promises of God? Or do you walk through the quicksand of questioning their reliability?

3. Is God in control?

Here is a fundamentally important place for your awe to rest. In some ways, all the other questions rest on this one. It would make no good difference in life if God didn't rule the places that resist his goodness. God's promises are only as trustworthy as the extent of his control. He can only guarantee that he will do something in the places where he has absolute control. What good is his almighty power if he lacks the authority to exercise it? It is of no comfort to know that God is in control if he does not rule over the circumstances where his care is essential. Yes, all the comfort of God's awesome qualities rests on his sovereign control over every situation, location, and person.

But here's the problem: at ground level, your world doesn't look to be under careful and wise control. In fact, at times it seems totally out of control. This gets us right back to the same place we have been with each of these questions. Will you let your interpretation of circumstances tell you who God is, or will you allow God's awesome revelation of himself to interpret your circumstances for you? You see, people who live in fear, who beat themselves up with way too many "what if" questions, or who have trouble turning off their minds when they go to bed don't have a circumstances problem; they have an awe problem. You and I will only rest in situations over which we have no control if we are in awe of the One who controls them all for his glory and for our good.

People who have to be in control don't first have a power problem; they have an awe problem, which produces power hunger. A lack of awe at the sovereignty of God causes them to try to establish personal peace and safety by means of personal control. What about you? Has your awe of God's infinite sovereignty freed you from both fear and the need to be in control?

4. Does God have the needed power?

How do you measure the power of God? How can poor, feeble minds grasp that which is without limit? Scripture tells us that God comes to us with the same power by which he raised Christ from the dead. Now that's a definition of ultimate power! What in the universe would be more powerful than the ability to speak life into a dead body? What could be a better definition of almighty power than to be able to rise up and walk away from being dead? There is no place where human beings are more powerless than in death.

If you've experienced the death of a loved one, you know what it is like. I stood next to my mom's bed after she had died and wished for one more conversation, wished I could hear her say "I love you" one more time, wished that she could squeeze my hand and say it would be okay. I wished with all that was in me for more, but she was gone, and I was powerless to do anything about it.

God's power is so great that he rules life and death. Now here's why this matters. You will only have peace in the face of your own weaknesses, failures, foibles, and inability when you are in awe of God's awesome power. You will only rise up to do what you don't have the natural ability to do when you know that God's awesome power is with you. Awe of God's power produces courage in the face of weakness. Awe of God's power enables you to admit your limits and yet live with courage and hope. Timidity, fear, denial, hiding, excusing, and running away are not first weakness problems but awe problems. I step into what is bigger than me because I know the One who is with me is bigger than what I am facing. What about you? How much of what you do is done out of fear and not faith? How often are you paralyzed by your weakness? Does awe of God's power cause you to live a forward-moving and courageous life?

5. Does God care about me?

Perhaps this is the question we're most conscious of. It's the question that the bullied teenager asks. It's the question asked by the wife who has watched her marriage go sour. It's the question the exhausted parent asks at the end of a very hard day with children. It's the question asked by the lonely single woman. The man who has just lost his job asks this question. It's what's asked by the person who with sadness has left the church that has lost its way. It's what the person suffering the weaknesses of old age asks. It's what the person asks who is struggling through a long illness. It's what you wonder about as you watch the surrounding culture coarsen and worsen.

God's care is foundational. It lets me know that all that he is, he is for me. His care means he will be good for me. His care means he will do what he promised for me. His care means he will exercise his control for me. His care means he will unleash his awesome power for me. Awe of his care allows me to embrace the hope found in all of his other qualities. The Bible never debates God's care; it assumes and declares it. It confronts you with the lavish nature of his mercy, love, patience, forbearance, grace, tenderness, and faithfulness. He is the ultimate loving Father. He is the completely faithful Friend. He is the One who stays closer than a brother. He alone will never leave you, no matter what. He is the One who never sends you without going with you. He is your protector, guide, defender, teacher, Savior, and healer. He never mocks your weakness but gives you strength. He never uses your sin against you but affords you forgiveness. He never plays favorites, never wants to give up on you, never gets exhausted or wishes he could quit. He never plays with you. He is never disloyal. His care is so awesome and so complete that nothing in your life's experience in any way compares. He cares!

What about you? Do you go through times of disappointment and complaining because you have allowed yourself to question his care? The size of your hope is directly related to the level of your awe of God's care.

So every word spoken in complaint, every murmur of grumbling is deeply theological. Our problem is not that the "good life" has passed us by, that people have failed us, or that life has been hard. All these things have happened to us because we live in a broken world. And if our contentment rests on life being easy, comfortable, and pleasurable, we'll have no contentment this side of eternity. We complain so much not because we have horizontal problems but because we have a vertical problem. Only when the awe of God rules your heart will you be able to have joy even when people disappoint you and life gets hard. Awe means your heart will be filled more with a sense of blessing than with a sense of want. You will be daily blown away by what you have been given rather than being constantly disturbed by what you think you need. Awe produces gratitude, gratitude instills joy, and the harvest of joy is contentment.

Tomorrow there is a good possibility that complaint will be on your lips, and when it is, cry out for your Savior's help. He alone can open your eyes to his glory. His grace alone can satisfy your heart. And as you cry out, remember that he is so rich in grace that he will never turn a deaf ear to your cries.

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