



AWE

WHY IT MATTERS FOR  
EVERYTHING  
WE THINK, SAY, & DO

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

“I still remember the first time I was in awe of God. It came after years of attending churches and calling myself ‘Christian.’ It was a major turning point in my life. It is an awe of God that inspires my major life decisions as well as my daily actions. Thank you, Paul, for getting beyond symptoms and getting at the heart of the matter. This book is brilliant, and I wish every believer would read it carefully. We live in a crazy time. We need books like this to help lay healthy foundations for our lives, so that we don’t spend our days overreacting to unpredictable events.”

**Francis Chan**, *New York Times* best-selling author, *Crazy Love* and *Forgotten God*

“Paul Tripp has a way of helping us to get beyond the surface. It is clear that Paul has thought through this subject deeply. Read this book and find yourself challenged and encouraged to stand in awe of the reality of God and to take him seriously because of it!”

**Eric M. Mason**, Lead Pastor, Epiphany Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; President, Thriving; author, *Manhood Restored*

“Paul Tripp’s books always challenge me and draw me closer to Christ. This book is no exception. As followers of Jesus, we can sometimes get too comfortable with God. It’s easy to forget that part of knowing and loving God is revering him. If you will read this book with a hungry and humble heart, God will use it to deepen your passion for Christ as you rediscover just who God is and why we’re invited to revel in his awesome glory.”

**Craig Groeschel**, Senior Pastor, LifeChurch.tv; author, *WEIRD: Because Normal Isn’t Working*

“Simply put, I read everything that Paul Tripp writes. I can’t afford to miss one word.”

**Ann Voskamp**, author, *New York Times* best seller *One Thousand Gifts*

“Deep in the soul of every human being is a longing for transcendence, created by God himself. Yet all too often, our pursuits and passions fixate on things that will never satisfy. What we need most desperately is to fall to our knees in renewed awe of our Creator. In *Awe*, my good friend Paul Tripp motivates us to find that posture and delight in staying there.”

**James MacDonald**, Pastor, Harvest Bible Chapel, Rolling Meadows, Illinois; author, *Vertical Church*

“When you find yourself in awe of something, you never forget it. It changes you. I just finished reading this book, and I’m writing this at 2:45 a.m. in tears. Convicted—not of my sin but of my righteousness in Christ! In awe of who Jesus is and who I am in him! Tripp has tapped into something that I hope is like a defibrillator to the flatlined believer. We were made to live in awe; may we never forget this!”

**Bart Millard**, Lead Singer, MercyMe

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*Whiter Than Snow: Meditations on Sin and Mercy* (2008)

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PAUL DAVID TRIPP

*Awe: Why It Matters for Everything We Think, Say, and Do*

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Tim Green, Faceout Studio

First printing 2015

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-4707-2

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-4710-2

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-4708-9

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-4709-6

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Tripp, Paul David, 1950-

*Awe* : why it matters for everything we think, say, and do / Paul David Tripp.

pages cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-4707-2 (hc)

1. God (Christianity)—Worship and love. 2. *Awe*.

I. Title.

BV4817.T75            2015

248.4—dc23

2015003091

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Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15  
14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To DC, Matthew, and Matt,  
young friends in life and ministry.  
Our gospel conversation has made me love Jesus more.





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# PREFACE

I should start with an admission. I wrote this book for me. I am an Epicurean of sorts. I love the visual arts, I love great music, and I love food of all kinds. A beautiful, well-executed painting leaves me in awe. A band's well-constructed album leaves me amazed and wanting more. The memory of a tasting menu at a great restaurant leaves me wanting to recreate dishes and revisit the establishment. None of these things are wrong in themselves. God intended us to be in awe of his creation, but that awe cannot and should not be an end in itself.

I wrote this book for me because, at this point in my life, I am more aware than ever that I have a fickle and wandering heart. I wish I could say that every moment I enjoy some created thing initiates in me a deeper worship of the Creator, but it doesn't. Empirical evidence in my life betrays that I give my heart to the worship of the thing that has been made rather than the One who made it—spending when I don't really have a need, envying what someone else has, or eating when I'm not really that hungry.

I wrote this book for me because I am aware that I need to spend more time gazing upon the beauty of the Lord. I need to put my heart in a place where it can once again be in awe of the grandeur of God that reaches far beyond the bounds of the most expressive words in the human vocabulary. I need awe of him to recapture, refocus, and redirect my heart again and again. And

I need to remember that the war for the awe of my heart still wages inside me.

I wrote this book for me because I need to examine what kind of awe shapes my thoughts, desires, words, choices, and actions in the situations and relationships that make up my everyday life. Three years ago I lost forty pounds. That I needed to at all embarrassed me. Writing this book reminded me that my weight gain was a spiritual issue, a matter of my heart before God. Like all other forms of subtle idolatry, it didn't happen overnight. If you gain half a pound per month, you will not notice it. But that's six pounds per year, and in five years you will have put on thirty pounds. Sadly, I had to confess the sin of gluttony, put food in its proper place, and cry out for the grace to worship the Giver, not his gifts.

I wrote this book for me because I came to see that I was wired for awe, that awe of something sits at the bottom of everything I say and do. But I wasn't just wired for awe. I was wired for awe of God. No other awe satisfies the soul. No other awe can give my heart the peace, rest, and security that it seeks. I came to see that I needed to trace awe of God down to the most mundane of human decisions and activities.

I wrote this book for me, but because I did, it's a book for you as well. I know that you are like me. The war that rages in my heart rages in yours as well. Things in the creation not only capture me, they capture you too. Like me, you need to spend more time gazing upon the awesome beauty of your Lord so that your heart will remember and, in remembering, be rescued.

I wrote this book for me, but I now give it to you. May it deepen your awe of your Redeemer, and may your heart be rescued, satisfied, and glad.

Paul David Tripp  
October 1, 2014

# HUMANITY

*Don't let me lose my wonder.*

KEITH AND KRISTYN GETTY<sup>1</sup>

He was five years old, and he was enthralled by the snow. He stood on the couch watching what he thought must be the biggest blizzard ever. As he pressed his nose against the window, he thought of making the biggest snowball ever—bigger than him, bigger than his dad's car, bigger than the garage, so big that he would look like an ant next to it. The thought made him smile. Before long he was begging his mommy to let him go outside.

She was on a quest. Not just any quest. It felt like this was the most important quest of her life. Sam had actually asked her to go to the prom, and now she was on a search for a dress. But not any dress. This had to be the ultimate, most beautiful prom dress ever. As she went from store to store, she imagined the dress and the moment when Sam would pick her up and see her in that gown. He would be stunned and immediately want to spend the rest of his life with her.

He sat with the number card in his hand, listening to the all-too-rapid cadence of the auctioneer's voice at the world's most prestigious antique auto auction. He had made lots of money in

his life, but he had convinced himself that he couldn't live without one more thing. It was the most beautiful automobile ever manufactured, and it would be auctioned next. As the bidding began, his chest tightened, his ears buzzed, and his hands got clammy. At the end of the day, he might be the proud owner of a gorgeous powder-blue 1965 Jaguar XKE.

When she got the call, she couldn't believe it. She rushed to the scene as fast as she could, but it was too late. The mansion of her dreams—the one she and her husband had spent twenty years of their life building and remodeling—had burned to the ground. Only ashes and smoke remained. As she got out of her car, she couldn't breathe. Things turned blurry, and the next thing she knew, she was surrounded by EMTs.

She must have dialed that radio station's number a thousand times with the hope that she would get free tickets to see the best band ever. She had all their recordings. She was a member of their fan club. She had saved up to buy a signed poster, but she had never heard them live. This was her chance. Her heart raced as a voice on the other end greeted her. It was finally going to happen. She couldn't believe it!

He was blown away. When he first entered seminary, he had no idea that this would happen. He had studied hard and done well, but this was unbelievable. It was his first Sunday. He had joined the staff of one of the biggest and most influential churches in the world. It had been his dream, and now it was coming true. He felt special, alive, and blessed.

On the one hand, it seemed stupid to pay seventy dollars for a steak. But this wasn't just any steak. No, this was a Wagyu cowboy rib eye, dry-aged over forty-five days. He just knew he would never again taste a piece of meat this quality. He didn't care what it cost. If it was the one and only time, nothing could keep him from this red-meat thrill. It was almost a spiritual experience.

He stood in line holding his mom's hand. It was going to happen. After what seemed to him like years of begging and bargaining, she had finally agreed to take him. They were in line to see the movie of his dreams, but not just on any theater screen. They were going to see the surround-sound, 3-D version on an IMAX screen. He felt he had died and gone to heaven. He held his 3-D glasses tight and couldn't wait for the wonder to begin.

It was one painting, but it may have been the most wonderful work of art a human hand had ever created. It had been touring the major galleries of the world, and she was thrilled that she would finally lay her eyes on it. She had seen it in art books and as posters but never the real thing in all its majesty. She would let nothing stop her from taking this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

He was bitter. He knew it was wrong, but it plagued him every day like an unwanted guest. He tried to distract himself. He tried to find joy in the people, places, and activities around him, but nothing really worked. He had been raised in a great family, and that was all he ever wanted. He had dreamed of the beautiful wife, the three sweet children, and the two-acre plot in the suburbs. He didn't want to be angry, but he was—angry at God. He hadn't asked for much. But now he was forty-five and beginning to gray. Who would want him now? He hated coming home at night. He hated being lonely. He hated his life.

The pain of the knee surgery was minor compared to the pain of what that surgery meant. Since middle school, every coach told him the same thing: he had it—that unusual X factor that makes great athletes great. He was the star of every team he had ever played on. His ambition of becoming an NFL star with adoring fans had always seemed easily within reach. He dreamed of the day he would sign that multimillion-dollar



contract. But now it was all over. That college football powerhouse would withdraw its scholarship, because, if he played again, he would never be great. It was over. His injury had killed his dream.

As the crane hoisted the sign in place, he felt as if life had been worth living. It was a rather small real-estate firm, but he had built it. He owned it. It was his. As he stood in front of his storefront, he felt like he had conquered the world. He felt he could do anything. He felt the buzz of success. And it felt so good.

He had seen them at the mall, 2013 Nike Air Jordan 1 Retros. White, red, and black—they were so cool. They were also almost two hundred dollars. How would he ever convince his parents to buy them for him? It just seemed impossible. He couldn't get the Air Jordans out of his mind. He had to find a way. He simply needed those sneakers.

He baited his hook one last time. It was getting dark, but he had to give it another try. It was out there. He had seen it before—the biggest bass in the lake. It would be the catch of his life. The fish he had already caught were just a tease. He threw his hook into the fading light one more time, and as he held onto his gear, he hoped.

What do all the people in these vignettes have in common? Awe. They get up every morning, and without ever being aware of it, they search constantly for awe. They have dissatisfaction in their souls, an emptiness they long to fill, and they are attracted to awesome things. That's why they go to great museums, stadium concerts, expensive restaurants, and play-off games. The little boy dreaming of Air Jordans is just as much an awe seeker as the successful business magnate. The teenage girl going to prom is as much on a quest for awe as the woman planning the house of her dreams. The athlete who reaches for stardom

seeks the same treasure as the man who yearns for the perfect wife and family.

It's not about spiritual awareness, interest, or knowledge. It's not first about church, theology, or biblical literacy. It's not even about wanting your little life to mean something. It's something that not only believers do. It's something that every person who has ever taken a breath does. It's not bound by family, culture, history, geography, language, or ethnicity. It's not a matter of age or gender. It's not about any of these things. What all these people share in common is that they are human beings, and because they are human beings, they are hardwired for awe. And so are you.

#### Awe: The Helicopter View

Let's start with the big picture—the helicopter view, if you will—of this thing called *awe* that stirs deep in the heart of each one of us.

1. *Awe is everyone's lifelong pursuit.* She sits in her little swing with feet kicking and a big smile on her face. She doesn't know what Mommy has just given her, but it was cold and sweet, and she wants as much of it as she can get in her mouth as soon as she can get it. She is enraptured. She is in awe. For the very first time, her tongue has savored ice cream. Her little brain cannot imagine that anything in the entire world is more delightful and fulfilling than this. She is ready to live her life in pursuit of that cold, sweet wonder that the big people call *ice cream*.

He has watched the video again and again. He can't stop watching it. It's like an addiction. The music that this one performer produces all by himself is a thing of amazement. There is something about the beauty, the wonder of it all, that brings him back to the video again and again. He's seventy years old, and he has not lost one bit of his capacity for wonder.

The little girl and the old man are alike. They are on the same journey. He's just been on the road longer than she has. He has sought, pursued, invested in, savored, celebrated, and been disappointed by many, many things in his pursuit of awe. She is having her mind blown for maybe the very first time, but she will soon become an awe junkie like him. She too will spend her life in pursuit of a dream. She too will want to be amazed. The old man and the baby girl are wired the same way. Maybe neither one of them is aware of what a driving force the desire for awe is. And perhaps he will die and she will continue to live not knowing why God planted this desire in their hearts.

2. *God created an awesome world.* God intentionally loaded the world with amazing things to leave you astounded. The carefully air-conditioned termite mound in Africa, the tart crunchiness of an apple, the explosion of thunder, the beauty of an orchid, the interdependent systems of the human body, the inexhaustible pounding of the ocean waves, and thousands of other created sights, sounds, touches, and tastes—God designed all to be awesome. And he intended you to be daily amazed.

3. *God created you with an awe capacity.* We not only live in an awe-inspiring world, we've also been created with powerful awe gates so that we can take in the awe that our hearts desire. Our brains and our ears can tell the difference between beautiful music and noise. We can hear the whispered chirp of the little finch and the irritating squawk of the crow. We can see the amazing segmented sections of the well-armored beetle's body. We can see the details of color, texture, and shape. We can see moving objects without blur, and we can see very near and very far. We also feel and touch things. We feel soft, wet, hard, hot, sharp, cold, smooth, silky, and bumpy. We can taste. Our tongues know salty, sweet, sour, peppery, hot, cold, briny, rough, and creamy. We not only desire awe in our lives, we have

been wonderfully created by God with the capacity to interact with and savor awesome things.

4. *Where you look for awe will shape the direction of your life.* It just makes sense that your source of awe will control you, your decisions, and the course your story takes. If you live in awe of material things, for example, you will spend lots of money acquiring a pile of material stuff; to afford your ever-increasing pile, you will have to work a lot. You will also tend to attach your identity and inner sense of peace to material possessions, spending way too much time collecting and maintaining them. If material things are your awe source, you will neglect other things of value and won't ever be fully satisfied, because these material things just don't have the capacity to satisfy your awe-longing heart. Yes, your house will be big, your car will be luxurious, and you will be surrounded with beautiful things, but your contentment in areas that really count will be small.

5. *Awe stimulates the greatest joys and deepest sorrows in us all.* Here's a simple way to do a personal awe check. Where do you experience your biggest moments of happiness and your darkest moments of sadness? What angers you or crushes you with disappointment? What motivates you to continue or makes you feel like quitting? What do you tend to envy in the lives of others, or where does jealousy make you bitter? What makes you think your life is worth living or causes you to feel like your life is a waste? When you say, "If only I had \_\_\_\_\_," how do you fill in the blank? What are you willing to make sacrifices for, and what in your life just doesn't seem worth the effort? Look at your highest joys and deepest sorrows, and you will find where you reach for awe.

Take anger, for example. Think of how little of your anger in the last couple months had anything at all to do with the kingdom of God. You're not generally angry because things are

in the way of God and his kingdom purposes. You're angry because something or someone has gotten in the way of something you crave, something you think will inspire contentment, satisfaction, or happiness in you. Your heart is desperate to be inspired, and you get mad when your pursuits are blocked. Where you look for awe will fundamentally control the thoughts and emotions of your heart in ways you normally don't even realize.

6. *Misplaced awe keeps us perennially dissatisfied.* Perhaps in ways that you have never come close to considering, your dissatisfaction is an awe problem. Perhaps it's not just that the people around you are less than perfect or your boss is hard to deal with or your children tend to give you a hard time. Maybe it's not just that you don't have the circle of friends that you've always wanted or that you've never scored that house of your dreams. Maybe it's not just that your health has declined and that old age has come too soon. Perhaps it's not just that you tend to find your mundane, everyday existence uneventful and boring. Maybe it's not just that you've never found a church where you can settle in and worship and serve. Maybe it's not just that you've found your education to be inadequate and that you've felt stuck in a career you dislike. Perhaps it's more than the fact that your neighbors are annoying and your extended family is given to too much drama. Perhaps all this dissatisfaction arises from a deeper heart dissatisfaction driven by where you have looked for awe.

7. *Every created awe is meant to point you to the Creator.* This will be a major theme of the book you have begun to read. Creation is awesome. God designed it to be awesome. And God designed you to take in creation's awesome display. You are meant to be inspired and to celebrate the awesome things that come from the Creator's hand. But as you participate and rejoice in the awesome display of creation, you must understand that

these awesome things were not intended to be ultimate. They were not made to be the stopping place and feeding station for your heart. No awesome thing in creation was meant to give you what only the Creator is able to give. Every awesome thing in creation is designed to point you to the One who alone is worthy of capturing and controlling the awe of your searching and hungry heart.

As it is true of a street sign, so it is true of every jaw-dropping, knee-weakening, silence-producing, wonder-inspiring thing in the universe. The sign is not the thing you are looking for. No, the sign points you to what you are looking for. So you can't stop at the sign, for it will never deliver what the thing it is pointing to will deliver. Created awe has a purpose; it is meant to point you to the place where the awe of your heart should rest. If awesome things in creation become your god, the God who created those things will not own your awe. Horizontal awe is meant to do one thing: stimulate vertical awe.

8. *Awesome stuff never satisfies.* Nothing in the entire physical, created world can give rest, peace, identity, meaning, purpose, or lasting contentment to your awe-craving heart. Looking to stuff to satisfy this internal desire is an act of personal spiritual futility. It just won't work. You would have as much success as you would if you were trying to bail water out of a boat with a strainer. The things of this world just weren't designed to do what you're asking them to do. Still, we all try every day, and when we do, we have a problem much bigger and deeper than a stuff problem. We have an awe problem.

#### Having It All, but Missing Awe

He was possibly the most discontented man I had ever met. In many ways he had everything that you and I could ever dream of. His successful career had gained him money, renown, and

power. He had all the accoutrements of success—you know, the big house on the well-manicured property, cars in the garage, and a boat at the shore. He had a lovely wife and four grown children. He took vacations just about wherever he wanted to go. He ate at the best restaurants and joined all the right clubs. He started his own foundation to help the needy, and he attended a solid church. But the one thing he hadn't achieved was personal happiness. With all the stuff of life at his feet, he was shockingly dissatisfied and scarily driven. His wife would joke that he wanted more and that he would probably die trying to find it.

When we met, he was an unhappy man. No, that is inaccurate. He was a bitter and cynical man. He was his own archaeologist, digging back through the mound of his existence, trying to make sense of it all. He carefully examined the pottery shards of his choices and decisions. In his mind, he held up all the artifacts he had collected over the years and wondered about their true value. He leafed through pages and pages of his story—his marriage, his career, his relationship with God, his friendships, his children, and a host of other side stories. He found himself asking the one question that he thought he would never ask. He had always thought it was a question for otherworldly dreamers or losers. But the question haunted him. It greeted him in the morning and put him to bed at the end of the day. It rode with him in his car and distracted him when he went golfing. It caused him to drink more than he should and to be irritable and impatient.

He came to the point where he hated all the things he had so carefully and obsessively collected, and he really hated the fact that most people around him envied him. “If they only knew, if they only knew,” was his repeated refrain. He had long since quit going to God with his angst. He felt that if God were listen-

ing, he would have helped him long ago. All that remained was to keep himself as busy as possible from early morning until late at night. Even though he was retired, he purchased a couple of small businesses—not because he needed the money but because he craved the distraction.

One of the first things he said to me was, “How could it be that I have it all and yet feel so empty?” It was a genius question, but he didn’t know it. It was deeply theological, but he didn’t see it. His depression kept him from understanding his own insight. It had all slipped through his fingers like bone-dry sand. He had it all, but he had come up empty. He desperately wanted me to fix it, to do something that would make it all seem worthwhile, but I couldn’t.

As he talked impatiently with me, bitterness colored every word. He was crying for help, but he didn’t know that the only help I had to offer, he probably wouldn’t want. As he talked, in the background, these words kept crashing through my brain, “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his own soul?” (Mark 8:36). He didn’t have a contentment problem. He had an awe problem.





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“It is clear that Tripp has thought through this subject deeply. Read this book and find yourself challenged and encouraged to stand in awe of the reality of God and to take him seriously because of it!”

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