**GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS**

**WE A.R.E. AWED BY GOD**

**Job 26:14**

**INTRODUCTION**

As we continue our Gospel Foundations series, what I’m going to do over the next few Sundays is walk us through our mission statement: We A.R.E. Awed by God, Revealing Christ, Expecting the Spirit. If you’ve paid a little attention to this statement, you’ll notice that it’s an acronym. But if you pay even closer attention, you’ll also notice that it’s a Trinitarian acronym. This has been the mission statement of our church since its earliest days, and it remains both a summary of who we are, and who we want to increasingly become.

As part of our efforts to put our own mark on this building, our leadership team has come up with three verses which will hang on the walls here in the sanctuary sometime in the next couple weeks. Each of these three verses corresponds with one of the phrases in the mission statement. Today, I have the privilege of presenting the first of these verses to you as we examine what it means to be awed by God.

That verse is Job 26:14:

“Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?”

This is a verse that takes your breath away, because it reminds us that as much as we may know God, what we know is but a whisper of who he truly is. It doesn’t matter if you’ve been a Christian for a few months or for decades. What you and I know is only a whisper of God’s majestic glory.

We’re thankful for that whisper, because without that whisper none of us could be forgiven of our sins and saved from God’s judgment. We need God to speak to us about the way of salvation that is found in Jesus Christ alone, and that is what he has done through the gift of his Word and the illumination of the Spirit.

But despite this revelation, the fact remains that all that we know, all the doctrine that we’ve learned, all the verses that we’ve memorized, all the experiences with God that we’ve had are but a whisper, because we’re not God. We’re fallen, finite sinners. Our minds are not only limited by the fact that we’re creatures and not the Creator, they’re also darkened by the cloud of our own sinfulness.

The fact that we only have a whisper doesn’t mean that we need to look somewhere else in order to know God fully. We must never move beyond God’s Word, or the Word of his grace, which is the gospel, because his Word has given us everything we need to know God fully even as we are fully known by God. We’re not called to look beyond the gospel. We’re called to look deeper into the gospel, because it’s in the gospel that God has most fully displayed the perfection of his character.

This is what Paul meant in Ephesians 2:7. After Paul wrote those wonderful verses that we have been saved by grace in Christ, he says:

“…so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

We may only have a whisper, but within that whisper is a universe of grace that we will never fully exhaust. If you’re a Christian, then you and I are going to spend ages plumbing the depths of the riches of the gospel, and even then, after millennia have passed, we will only have scratched the surface of these immeasurable riches. And if you’re not a Christian, God’s invitation to you is “Come and see. Come and see what I have done in the giving of my Son for sinners.”

And as you do, you must remember that the glories of the gospel will never be exhausted. They won’t be exhausted by an evangelistic tract, or by a powerful sermon, or by a lifetime of fellowship with God and his people. Those who are in Christ will spend endless ages being shown the glories of the gospel, because the glory of the gospel is the glory of God himself, and God is infinite. We are not. Eternal life won’t change that. When we die and go to heaven, we will be eternally finite. There is only one who is eternally infinite. It is God himself, and for the countless ages to come, he will peel back the infinite layers of glory contained within this glorious gospel.

That’s why we chose Job 26:14. This verse reminds us that what we know about our Triune God, about who he is and about what he has done for us in Jesus Christ, are but the outskirts of his ways, a whisper of the full thunder of his power, and the effect of this reminder is meant to leave us awed by God. It’s meant to leave us shaking our heads in wonder at the grace that God has poured out on us in Christ.

What we’re going to do is spend our time together studying this verse, because we don’t just want to understand what it means to us. We want to understand what it meant to the original readers. We have the amazing privilege of reading the Bible in light of the cross. The original readers didn’t, which means that if we are to read the Bible faithfully, we must try to read it as they would have read it first. Only after we’ve done that are we to apply our gospel lens and see how the passage points to Christ. As we do, I believe that we will come to a greater appreciation for this verse and for what it means to be awed by God.

*Exposition of Job 26:14*

Let’s start with a big picture view of the book of Job itself. Job is the story of a great man who was also a good man. Not only was he the wealthiest man in the entire region, but he was also a genuinely pious man as well. He loved the Lord and sought to obey his commands, and because of that, the Bible describes him as “blameless and upright”.

But one day, Job suddenly goes from having everything to having nothing. His animal herds are stolen. His servants are killed. A lightning storm burns up his sheep. But worst of all, he receives news that all ten of his children, who were gathered together in the same house for a birthday party, are tragically killed after a great wind caused the house to collapse. And then to top it all off, he catches a horrible skin disease that afflicts him with sores from his head to his toes.

All of that happens in the first two chapters of Job. The other forty chapters are spent trying to process why this happened and what we are to take from this series of tragedies.

Many things are discussed in the following chapters, but if we would highlight one thing that Job is ultimately about, we could say that it’s a book about innocent suffering.

We know that a lot of suffering in the world isn’t innocent. For example, it may come from foolish choices. Foolish choices exist not in the black and white, but in the grey. They aren’t moral choices *per se*, but they can still lead to suffering. They’re choices like how much time we spend on our screens. It’s not morally wrong to engage with social media or play video games, which is one of the reasons why many of us engage with them, but that doesn’t mean they’re good for us.

In her insightful book titled *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, Dr. Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University writes,

“The results could not be clearer: teens who spend more time on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy.”

She cites other studies that draw the same conclusions about loneliness and depression. It’s quite clear that, generally speaking, our screens are bad for us, especially when they’re used for social media, and the younger we are, the worse our screens become. But we still do it, and parents still allow it. It’s foolish, and sadly, this foolishness often leads to suffering.

Other suffering comes not from foolishness, but from sin. It comes from the morally harmful choices that we make. If you’re a chronic liar, you’re going to suffer the consequence of having no one trust you. If you’re a young person and you build a habit of dishonouring your parents, you’re never going to learn the lesson that life doesn’t revolve around you, and that’s going to lead to suffering.

And if you happen to sin in a way that’s also illegal – physical violence, fraud, uttering threats, drug use – then whether you’re young, or whether you’re older, you’ll also face the suffering of going through the criminal justice system. You may say, “That’s only if I get caught”, and that’s true, because the police aren’t omniscient. But do you know what? *God is*. He sees everything. He knows it all. Nothing escapes his attention, and he will hold you to account for every sin you’ve ever committed, whether in public, or in private.

We suffer because of our foolishness. We suffer because of our sin. But sometimes, we suffer simply because we live in a fallen world. This kind of suffering doesn’t have a moral cause. Nor is it the result of our foolish choices. Instead, it comes to us in the mystery of God’s providence without easy answers or explanations.

This is what we call innocent suffering. It doesn’t mean that the person who’s suffering is innocent in the sense that they’re sinless. Only Jesus can make that claim. All of us have sinned, which means that none of us are completely innocent. But innocent suffering captures the reality that sometimes we suffer for reasons that are unknown to us. We can’t trace it back to our sin, or to our foolishness.

This is what the disciples learned in John 9 when they passed by the man who was blind from birth. They asked Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Their question assumed that there always had to be a moral cause for suffering. But Jesus replied,

“It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.” – John 9:3

The blind man had spent all his life as an innocent sufferer, and he didn’t know why until that moment in John 9 when Jesus finally provided an explanation. He was blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him through Jesus’ healing.

There is such a thing as innocent suffering, and no book in the Bible wrestles with the implications of innocent suffering like Job. We need a book like this, because innocent suffering is hard for us to come to grips with. It’s what happens when bad things happen to good people. It’s what happens when children die. It’s what happens when a godly man dies in a car crash while the drunk who caused the crash lives.

Innocent suffering is hard to accept, because it seems so unfair, that the righteous would suffer while the wicked prosper. That’s why some religions say there’s no such thing as innocent suffering. Take the Hindu concept of karma as an example. Karma says that you only get what you deserve. If you receive good, it’s because you did good. If you receive evil, it’s because you did evil. The evil you did may have been in a previous lifetime before you were reincarnated, but it was still you. You did the evil, and therefore you must suffer for it.

The Bible actually teaches the same general principle, not about reincarnation, but that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. When God gave the Law through Moses, he revealed to Israel that if they obeyed his commands, they would be blessed and life would go well for them. If they didn’t obey his commands, they would be cursed.

This is what Job’s three friends believed. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar believed that the righteous would prosper and the wicked would suffer, and that there are no exceptions.

But if you read through your Bible, you’ll notice that there are exceptions everywhere. From the very beginning, it was Abel the righteous son who was murdered, not Cain. Joseph was thrown into prison for crimes he didn’t commit. Uriah the Hittite was sent to die because King David lusted after his wife.

Innocent suffering is present throughout Scripture, but Job’s three friends ignored this and held that all suffering was the result of foolishness or sin. So when Job suffered on that devastating day when he lost his wealth, his servants, his ten children, and his health, it didn’t take long for his three friends to start pointing fingers at him.

They arrived with good intentions to comfort and mourn with their friend, and for a while they did pretty well. For seven days and seven nights, they wisely sat with him and said nothing. But as soon as the first of the three friends opens his mouth to speak, things start going dreadfully wrong. This is what Eliphaz says in 4:7-9:

“Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.”

Eliphaz is saying, “What has happened to you doesn’t happen to the innocent. It only happens to the guilty. You must have sinned against God, and now God is punishing you.” That’s how Job’s three friends viewed suffering, and they make a point of it by repeating it again and again throughout the majority of the book.

But Job is unwavering in his reply. He maintains his innocence, he declares that his conscience is clear, and he rebukes his friends for their unhelpful and false theology. And do you know what? He was right. His suffering wasn’t the result of his sin or foolishness. His suffering was innocent.

That’s the big picture view of Job. Chapter 26 falls in the middle of Job’s discussions with his three friends, and it comes as a time when Job is starting to get a little frustrated. So when we read the first four verses, we must not miss the sarcasm in Job’s voice:

“How you have helped him who has no power!

 How you have saved the arm that has no strength!

How you have counseled him who has no wisdom,

 and plentifully declared sound knowledge!

With whose help have you uttered words,

 and whose breath has come out from you?

Job’s not commending his friends. He’s mocking them. His words are dripping with sarcasm, because here he is, having lost everything and barely clinging to a will to live, and they’re calling him to repent. What he needs is his friends to grieve with him, but instead they’re accusing him of things he’s never done. Job’s saying, “Are you kidding me? Is that all you have to offer?” Job’s becoming bitter, and he expresses that bitterness with these sarcastic words.

Having vented a little, Job moves on to teach his friends a lesson in theology, and he does so by meditating on the theme of God’s absolute sovereignty. That’s what verses 5-13 are all about. The reason why he reflects on God’s sovereignty will become clear as we understand these nine verses.

Job starts with the lowest place, the place of the dead, in verses 5-6:

The dead tremble

 under the waters and their inhabitants.

Sheol is naked before God,

 and Abaddon has no covering.

Sheol was the Old Testament place of the dead. Abaddon was the supernatural spiritual power who stands guard over that place. When Job says “Sheol is naked before God and Abaddon has no covering”, he’s saying that not even death can separate us from God’s sovereign control. We can’t hide from God, not even in death. God’s rule over our lives extends even into the afterlife. Even the supernatural spiritual beings who dwell in the place of the dead stand vulnerable and exposed before God’s piercing gaze. God is sovereign over the physical and the spiritual, the living and the dead.

Job continues his reflection in verses 7-10, moving up from the place of the dead to the ground and sky:

 He stretches out the north over the void

 and hangs the earth on nothing.

The Hebrew word for “north” here is *zaphon*. There was a mountain called Mount Zaphon, or “Mount North”, that was the ancient equivalent of Mount Olympus in Greek mythology. It was the cosmic mountain of the gods. What Job is doing here is he’s saying that Mount Zaphon, the mount of the gods in the north, belongs exclusively to the God of Israel. Long before the Raptors ever said “We The North”, Job was saying “God the North”.

Job continues by saying that God has stretched the north over the great “void”. This is creation language which brings Genesis 1 to mind, when “The earth was without form and void”. But over that void, God has stretched his divine authority so that he reigns over all creation.

But God doesn’t only reign. He also sustains. He “hangs the earth on nothing”, keeping it spinning perfectly in place. Then in verse 8,

 He binds up the waters in his thick clouds,

 and the cloud is not split open under them.

This is a reference to the waters that flooded the earth in the times of Noah when God opened up the windows of heaven and let the rain fall upon the earth for forty days and forty nights. Job is painting a picture of God holding up those same waters with the clouds as he fulfills his promise to Noah to never again flood the earth.

Then in verses 9-10:

 He covers the face of the full moon

 and spreads over it his cloud.

 He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters

 at the boundary between light and darkness.

In verse 9, Job describes the covering of “the face of the full moon”. “Full moon” can also be translated “his throne”, which would mean that God is shrouding his throne in mystery and making it inaccessible to the common man.

In verse 10, “circle” is literally a “limit”, a poetic way of depicting boundaries and order. God has put boundaries between land and sea, light and darkness, as he orders all of creation in his divine wisdom.

When we take verses 5-10 together, we see a picture of creation as a place of order and boundaries, ruled and sustained by God himself. The earth is spinning where it should, the flood waters are being held back, the proper boundaries between land and sea and good and evil are all in place, all because God reigns over creation in wisdom and power.

But then, we get a surprise in verse 11:

 The pillars of heaven tremble

 and are astounded at his rebuke.

The peaceful tranquility of creation’s order is suddenly shaken up by God’s rebuke. Job is reminding his friends that, as much as the world is a place of rules and boundaries, there are times when God shakes things up and does something completely unexpected. He thunders from heaven and causes the pillars of heaven to tremble and wonder at what he is going to do next.

Here’s his point. Job is saying that, yes, most of the time the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer, but that’s not always the case. Sometimes, God shakes up creation and transcends the natural order by bringing about suffering that is completely unexpected.

Job understood that suffering doesn’t fit into neat little categories that are predictable and ordered, because the natural order isn’t God. God is God, and sometimes, he does what no one expects.

But why? Why create such order only to shake it up? The answer is found in verses 12-13:

 By his power he stilled the sea;

 by his understanding he shattered Rahab.

 By his wind the heavens were made fair;

 his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.

God shakes up the created order in order to defeat the enemy. The sea is a picture of chaos and disorder, which threaten to upend the moral order. “Rahab” is another name for “Leviathan”, the massive sea serpent of old that represented all of the forces of evil that opposed God’s rule. Job is telling us in these verses that, when the Lord caused the pillars of heaven to tremble, he was also defeating the forces of evil in the world. He was taking the worst things in life and turning them into the best things in life.

Job is saying something incredibly profound. He’s saying that his innocent suffering, his suffering that has made the pillars of heaven tremble, has resulted not in the enemy’s triumph, but in the enemy’s defeat. God has shaken up the fabric of creation by inflicting him with his unexpected, undeserved suffering, so that through it, he would pierce the fleeing serpent.

Job knew that his suffering wasn’t meaningless. It had a purpose beyond anything that he could ever have imagined, because God’s ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. He shakes up the moral order, and when he does, he does his best work, so that we would always be aware that he is God and we are not.

This leads to our verse. As Job reflects on God’s sovereignty over death, over creation, and over evil itself, he can’t help but say,

“Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?

If Job could say that, how much more should we? How much more should we stand in awe of God when we know not only about Job, but about the one who is greater than Job? Because as powerful as Job’s story may be, it’s only a shadow, a whisper, of the greatest story of all, the story of another innocent man who suffered. Like Job, this man had people pointing their fingers at him. But unlike Job, this man was truly innocent. He never sinned, not once. He was the spotless Lamb of God, and he didn’t just lose his health and wealth. He lost his very life as he suffered, bled, and died as a completely innocent man.

Jesus is the true Job. No one suffered greater injustices than Jesus. Not you, not me, and not Job. And it was precisely through these injustices that God has pierced the fleeing serpent. He has crushed the head of the snake. God has shaken the pillars of heaven by sending his own Son to die on the cross for our sins so that all who trust in him could be forgiven and rescued from the devil’s power. The death of the innocent one has brought life to the guilty, both now and forevermore.

Christopher Ash puts it beautifully:

“Job has grasped that the problem and threat of evil is of such a magnitude that its destruction will involve a shaking that goes to the core of creation, a shaking that is embodied and anticipated in his own innocent sufferings, a shaking that will finally be fulfilled only when the earth quakes at the cross of Jesus Christ” (Christopher Ash)

Let us stand in awe of this God: This God who is sovereign over Sheol, Abaddon, and the serpent; This God who creates and sustains creation by the word of his power; This God who crushes the serpent using the serpent’s own schemes.

It takes infinite wisdom to do that, to bring the highest good out of the worst evils, but that is precisely what God has done in the cross of Christ. He has shown that there is none like him, and that none can ever fully understand the thunder of his power.

God is worthy of our awe, and yet, it’s often difficult to give it to him. We want to be awed by God, but so often we’re not, which is why we’ve put it in our mission statement. We want to see it there so that we would be reminded that we want to be a church that is increasingly growing in its awe of God.

Let me briefly suggest two things we can do to individually and collectively grow in our awe of God.

(1) **GUARD YOUR ATTENTION**

I think many of us fail to live in awe of God because our capacity for awe is being sucked up by the world. We spend so much time being wowed and shocked by the fake world of entertainment that we have nothing left to give to God.

I experience this all the time. Sometimes I’m distracted by the latest YouTube phenomenon, and after watching it, I’m not thinking, “Wow, God is amazing!” I’m usually thinking “Wow, that person is amazing.”

The reality is that we are finite creatures, and that means we have a finite capacity for awe. We don’t have unlimited quantities of awe to give to the world and then to give to God. If the world gets our awe, God doesn’t.

In his book *Competing Spectacles*, Tony Reinke writes:

“Overconsuming on amusement drains our soul’s vigor. Just as my time is a zero-sum game, so is my ‘spiritual energy’ – my affections and my bandwidth for awe.”

All of us have a bandwidth for awe. If we use it on the world, then we’ll have nothing left for God. That means that we have to guard our attention. We have to discipline ourselves to live in such a way that the best of our awe is reserved for God.

How do we do that? Here’s one suggestion. Let’s stop starting our days off with our phones. I’m guilty of this. Before I’ve been awake for fifteen minutes, I’ve had several moments of awe just browsing the day’s news! Or take Saturday nights as another example. Rather than spending them on movies and video games that drain our soul’s vigour, could we perhaps spend them in ways that preserve the best of our affections for Sunday morning? It could be good conversation, or quiet reflection, or going for a walk. The point is, let’s intentionally guard our attention so that the best of our awe is reserved for God, and God alone.

(2) **COME WITH EXPECTATION**

Lastly, let us come to God with expectation. I think it’s a wonderful thing to read your Bible and go to church on Sundays out of habit. Building regular spiritual rhythms into our weeks is such a helpful tool to cultivate our relationships with God. We need discipline.

But we also need something else. We need expectation. We need to come to God’s Word with expectation, believing that God is going to show up and reveal himself to us in his Word. We need to come together on Sundays, not dragging our feet, but eager to respond with awe to who God is and what He has done.

That’s not going to be easy, because life grinds away at our souls to the point that just showing up at church is a victory. I know what that’s like. That’s one of the reasons why I prioritize our pre-service prayer. Praying with other people before the service begins serves my soul, and it builds in me an expectation that God is going to do mighty things in my life, and in the lives of those around me. You don’t have to pray with us, though you’re certainly welcome to. You could also pray with your family at home, or spend a little time by yourself, cultivating an attitude of expectation before you’ve arrived.

Coming with expectation makes a world of difference. We come together, not with the expectation that we would be awed by people, but that we would be awed by God. And if we do, I’m confident that God will meet us in our expectation and reveal himself as the only one who is worthy of our worship.