

YAWNING AT TIGERS

You Can't Tame the Almighty, So Stop Trying

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Names and identifying details of some people mentioned in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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To Dad and Mom

This book is all about God. Thanks for introducing us.

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The Greatest Adventure

People are starving for the awe of God.

Most don't know it, of course. We think we're starving for success or money or excitement or acceptance—you name it. But here's the problem. Even those fortunate enough to satisfy these cravings find we are still hungry. Hungrier, even.

Why? Because we've left untouched the most ancient and aching need, the one stitched into the fabric of our souls: to know and love a transcendent God.

I believe that once you strip away all our shallow desires and vain pursuits, it's God we're after. And not just any God. We have enough friends. We need a great and awesome God. A God worth worshipping.

We thirst for transcendence and long to be loved. In the full portrayal of God found in Scripture, we find both.

Our souls find satisfaction only in the God who is grand enough to worship and close enough to love. We need a home, but we also crave adventure. The greatest adventure is to seek for God.

Let it begin . . .

Part 1

Tiger Territory

Divine Invasion

We love talking about God's love.

Just drop in on almost any evangelical church service and listen. You'll hear worship choruses dripping with emotive lyrics that border on romantic. The sermon will gush with assurances of God's inexhaustible affection. While such affirmations are good—we need to be reminded of God's love—something is missing. Rarely do we hear about God's mystery and majesty, let alone whisper a word about his wrath.

This one-side portrayal diminishes our experience of God. We can't truly appreciate God's grace until we glimpse his greatness. We won't be lifted by his love until we're humbled by his holiness.

Oswald Chambers wrote, "The Bible reveals not first the love of God but the intense, blazing holiness of God."¹ This book is an invitation to encounter that blazing holiness and to find, as Chambers went on to write, "his love at the center of that holiness."² If we long to experience that love, we must begin with a topic many of us would rather avoid: the holiness of God.

Into the Wild

Tuesday, October 19, 2011, seemed like a typical day in the small town of Zanesville, Ohio. The weather was seasonably cool. It rained. People went to work. Kids went to school. And more than fifty wild animals—including lions, tigers, and bears—were loose in the area. That afternoon the 911 dispatch started receiving reports from alarmed residents: a wolf was spotted

near the high school, a mountain lion on a rural road, a lion under a streetlight.

By nightfall Zanesville was in full emergency mode. Construction lights flashed the message: CAUTION: EXOTIC ANIMALS . . . STAY IN VEHICLE. Residents were ordered indoors while local law enforcement scrambled to protect the public.

It all started when Terry Thompson, owner of a local private zoo, released his exotic animals before taking his own life. The freed animals included Bengal tigers, lions, black bears, grizzly bears, mountain lions, leopards, and wolves. “It’s like Noah’s ark wrecking right here in Zanesville, Ohio,” said celebrity animal handler Jack Hanna.³

News cameras descended on Zanesville and the world watched as the surreal event unfolded. For one evening tigers and lions stalked, not the remote jungles of Asia and Africa but the sleepy streets of suburban America. In those twilight hours, two very different worlds collided. The wild invaded the civilized. The exotic clashed with the ordinary. The familiar was disrupted by *the other*.

Yawning at Tigers

What happened in Zanesville sparked a national debate on exotic animal laws. But it led my mind in a different direction. It made me think of another unlikely encounter—not between a small town and wild animals but between humans and a holy God. Like the residents of Zanesville, we have heard reports of a foreign entity in our midst. Unlike them, however, we often fail to appreciate the gravity of what that presence means.

The Bible describes God in sobering terms. Among the myriad titles given, he is called “a consuming fire,” “Judge of all the earth,” and the “Lord of hosts”⁴—a title that portrays God poised for battle, at the head of a heavenly army. In addition to these fearsome descriptions, the

Bible stresses God's discontinuity with humankind. "God is not human that he should . . ." is almost a refrain in Scripture.⁵ We might imagine that God is a sort of Superman, just like you or me but with additional powers. But that kind of thinking betrays a dangerous illusion about God's nature. The truth is that God is radically different from us, in degree and kind. He is ontologically dissimilar, wholly other, dangerous, alien, holy, wild.

If we truly believed this kind of God was in our midst, I wonder if we would respond more like the people in Zanesville—lock our doors and call the police.

But for the most part we neither tremble in fear nor thrill with excitement at the prospect of encountering this wild deity. Instead our church experiences are largely predictable and sedate. Our spiritual lives are devoid of passion. Yes, we believe, but often our knowledge of God is dry and cerebral. We give mere mental assent to truths that should leave us shaking. We mumble perfunctory prayers. We ask God to keep us safe, not realizing that it is from him we most need protecting. Even when we see evidence of God in our midst, when we glimpse his holiness, we're more likely to yawn than yell. Somehow we've succeeded in making the strange ordinary. We walk by tigers without looking twice.

Why are we so anesthetized? What's behind our lack of reverence, fear, and awe?

I think it's simple.

We've forgotten how big God is.

Dangerous Presence

I remember having this point presented in dramatic fashion when I visited Israel. I was there with a group of American journalists. Our Jewish guide, Amir, had been leading trips through the Holy Land for thirty years and had a profound grasp of Scripture. At each site we visited, Amir

would seek out a spot as isolated as possible from the never-ending stream of tourists, gather us in a semicircle, and expound upon the historical and theological significance of the site.

Sometimes he seemed more like a preacher than a tour guide. I remember one talk in particular. With the Mount of Olives shimmering in the background, Amir described what he saw as the basic problem of the universe.

“God longs to come down to earth to redeem the righteous and judge the wicked,” he said. “But there’s a problem.”

He leaned toward us and stretched out his arms like a scarecrow.

“His presence is like radiation, more dangerous than plutonium. Nothing can live when God comes near. If God came to earth, both the righteous and unrighteous would perish. It would be like a thousand nuclear bombs exploding at once. We would all die!”

Initially Amir’s God-as-plutonium metaphor struck me as strange. I’ve heard God described as a father, master, king, warrior, judge . . . but plutonium? Plutonium is pretty nasty stuff. Actually, it’s awful. If inhaled, it’s one of the deadliest elements known to man. Other kinds of radiation, like an X-ray, the body can handle in low dosages. But just one-millionth of a gram of plutonium will kill a person if it enters the lungs. One pound could kill millions.⁶

I remember watching the news in the wake of the scramble to contain the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant disaster in Japan in 2011. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* described the precautions taken by the emergency workers. In addition to constantly measuring radiation with cell-phone-sized dosimeters strapped to their chests, they wore “face masks with two filters . . . hooded Tyvek suits, three layers of gloves and covers for their shoes. They wound tape at sleeves and pants cuffs to seal gaps.”⁷ Even these precautions were decried by experts as too lax. That’s how dangerous plutonium is—when it gets out.

Other and Intimate

Amir's comparison seemed strange, maybe even sacrilegious. But as I recounted God's interactions with the ancient Israelites, I wondered if he was onto something.

I thought of all the stories surrounding the ark of the covenant, where people were struck dead or sickened from coming in contact with God's immediate presence. I thought of poor Uzzah, the Israelite who was killed just for putting out his hand to steady the ark of the covenant (2 Sam. 6:7). Or the times when God warned Moses to keep the people back from his glory lest God "break out against them" (Exod. 19:4). In these stories it almost seems like there was some kind of radioactive field surrounding God. Not literally, perhaps, but from reading these accounts you get the unmistakable idea that his holiness is dangerous, even deadly.

We tend to avoid these passages or explain them away. Each time a popular atheist writes a book accusing God of being mean (and somehow simultaneously nonexistent) we spill gallons of ink trying to defend God's actions. While I appreciate the works of apologists, this sort of enterprise often becomes a subtle way of domesticating God. After we get through explaining him, he comes off as misunderstood or hapless. I'd prefer just to say, "Yes, God is dangerous. He's not a house cat; he's a lion. You're free to deny his existence or pretend that he's harmless. Go ahead and pet him if you'd like; just don't expect to get your arm back."

I'm reminded of the sad, strange story of Ellie Quo, a thirty-two-year-old Australian man who decided to put his fighting skills to the ultimate test. In the spring of 1989, after being told by his kung fu instructor that he had reached a level where he could kill wild animals with his bare hands, the impressionable student decided it was time to take on the most lethal predator. He sneaked into the Melbourne Zoo at night and scaled the lion enclosure. But rather than doing

battle with one lion, he faced several. The fight ended with predictable results, and zookeepers found Quo (or what was left of him) the next morning.⁸

It's a bizarre story that makes you question Quo's sanity. How could anyone, regardless of training, hope to take on a pack of lions with his bare hands? Yet the ill-fated man's foolishness is nothing compared to mere mortals who claim parity with an omnipotent God.

Perhaps it was to convey this dangerous side of God that pastor and author Eugene Peterson half-jokingly suggested churches post signs outside their buildings that read: BEWARE THE GOD.⁹

"The places and occasions that people gather to attend to God are dangerous," Peterson explains. "They're glorious places and occasions, true, but they're also dangerous. Danger signs should be conspicuously placed, as they are at nuclear power stations."¹⁰

Pulitzer-prize-winning writer Annie Dillard takes it a step further:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.¹¹

Such vivid warnings may sound like exaggeration, but are they? Each year four or five

people die at the Grand Canyon because of “overly zealous photographic endeavors.”¹² In search of the perfect picture, these tourists disregard warning signs and venture too close to the precipice. They underestimate the risk and end up paying the ultimate price. When we approach God casually, as if he were some sort of cosmic buddy, we make a similar mistake. We demonstrate a dangerous misunderstanding about his nature.

Don’t get me wrong. God is not cruel and capricious. But Amir was right—he’s dangerous. And that presents us with a huge problem. God’s holiness is deadly, incompatible with life, especially for sinful mortals like us. “No one may see me,” God warned, “and live” (Exod. 33:20).

But so far I’ve been telling only half of the story. Because just when God’s holiness seems overwhelming, when the gulf between us seems hopelessly wide, that’s where the gospel comes in. The good news is that this dangerous God turns out to be a lover. And he’s not content to love us from a distance. He wants to be with us so desperately he cooked up the most creative and costly way imaginable to bridge the chasm.

God is dangerous, yes, but loving. He’s above and beyond our physical world, yet mysteriously present within it. This, of course, is the grand paradox of the Christian faith. We worship a God transcendent and immanent, other and intimate, high and lifted up yet closer than our own breath.

He’s the Intimate Stranger, and we are the objects of his fierce affection. Now the temple veil is torn. The Holy of Holies beckons and we’re free to enter in. Just remember to tread lightly . . . he’s still the same God.

Notes

Chapter 1: Divine Invasion

1. Oswald Chambers, quoted in Martin H. Manser, ed. *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 131.
2. Ibid.
3. Christina Caron, “Zanesville Animal Massacre Included 18 Rare Bengal Tigers,” ABC News, October 19, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/zanesville-animal-massacre-included-18-rare-bengal-tigers/story?id=14767017>.
4. See, for example, the following verses: “For the LORD your God is *a consuming fire*” (Deuteronomy 4:24); “Will not the *Judge of all the earth* do right?” (Gen. 18:25); “The *LORD of hosts*, he is the King of glory! (Ps. 24:10 ESV).
5. See, for example, “God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind” (Num. 23:19).
6. Carl Grossman, “Bright Than the Brightest Star,” *Learning to Glow: A Nuclear Reader* Editor, John Bradley, (The University of Arizona Press, 2000), 190.
7. Phred Dvorak, “Japanese Nuclear Cleanup Workers Detail Lax Safety Practices at Plant” *The Wall Street Journal*,
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304906004576371300261616120.html>
8. Danielle Dauenhauer, “13 Idiots Who Climbed the Fence at the Zoo,” Ranker,
<http://www.ranker.com/list/13-of-the-best-idiots-climbing-the-wall-at-the-zoo/danielle-dauenhauer>.
9. Eugene Peterson, *Leap over a Wall* (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 144.

10. Ibid.

11. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 52.

12. Kevin Miller, “The Fear of God” (sermon, Church of the Resurrection, Wheaton, IL),
<http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/outlines/2007/october/fearofgod.html>.

Yawning at Tigers takes us past domesticated Christianity, into the wilds where God's raw majesty, love, and power become more real and transformative than we could ever imagine. To read this book, upload an EPUB or FB2 file to Bookmate. How do I upload a book? Yawning at Tigers has a message all Christians need to hear. This is an awesome read! Every Christian should read this book! I am a bit of a sucker for cheap books on my Kindle. And lately I have been on something of a theology/faith kick (so much so that I am now hopelessly behind in my reading). So when I saw Yawning at Tigers: You Can't Tame God, So Stop Trying by Drew Dyck temporarily on sale for less than two dollars I had to click.