

THEN SINGS MY SOUL 1: “Amazing Grace”

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As I begin this new series exploring both the history and theology of some of our greatest hymns; there is little doubt where we ought to begin. On the top, of the top 10 lists of most Christians, and even among the less religious is this classic hymn written sometime around 1779, by the now infamous former slave trader; John Newton. This hymn has been recently given new ‘props’ as the title of a movie; which is a study of the life and influence of William Wilberforce; England’s abolitionist, and Newton’s good friend.

Most of us know, at least in part, the story of John Newton. He was raised primarily by a Godly mother who instructed her son in the ways of God until her untimely death, when John was only 7. Thereafter his life took many different paths; following his father to sea, serving and deserting the British navy, eventually being enlisted and then becoming the master of a slave ship all his own; transporting African slaves to England. It was a dark and stormy night upon one such journey that Newton cried out to God in anger, fear, and desperation as his ship headed for the bottom of the stormy sea. God spared Mr. Newton and the rest of the crew and cargo that night; and years later Newton wrote of that event: “That tenth of March is a day much remembered by me; and I have never suffered it to pass unnoticed since the year 1748 – the Lord came from on high and delivered me out of deep waters.”

Following that dramatic conversion, John Newton began a year's long process of giving up the sea, and slave trading, and the corresponding guilt; while he answered the new calling of God to become a preacher. It was some 16 years later, while serving as the pastor of a growing congregation in Olney, Buckinghamshire, that John and a new parishioner, poet, William Cowper, made a pact to write a new song each week for a Bible Study Newton conducted and Cowper attended. It was upon the text, I Chronicles 17: 16-17 that Newton was preaching the week he wrote a new song; originally titled: Faith's Review and Expectation. Here is that text:

Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and prayed, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?...You speak as though I were someone very great, O Lord God! What more can I say to you about the way you have honored me? You know what your servant is really like. I Chronicles 17:16-18

This introspective sermon became an opportunity for John Newton to share the humbling testimony of God's unfailing love and Amazing Grace, (the title later affixed to this original poem). Though the author of the tune of the song is unknown it was likely Scottish or Irish in origin. One can almost hear the bagpipes which so solemnly and appropriately fit the hauntingly beloved words of this now famous hymn. And if one listens very closely, some would say you might even hear the groans of the sea-born slaves echoing from the lower holds, certainly in the words, if not in the tune of these verses.

This morning it will be my joy to share with you, the Biblical theology of Grace as presented so beautifully in this most popular hymn, to that end, let us recall:

1. THE GRACE THAT FINDS US

Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Every honest testimony begins with the humble recognition and acknowledgment that we are lost, long before we get found. In fact, no one ever gets found until being lost is honestly admitted.

The focus of this verse is often the blindness and recover of sight that Grace provides, but I want to focus further back. John Wesley, a contemporary of John Newton's drew upon this hymn verse to illustrate his understanding of what has become a Methodist point of distinction; what Wesley called "Prevenient Grace", or grace that goes before, or grace that gets us to salvation, grace that prevents our destruction, or grace that finds us long before we are even looking. This prior Grace precedes the process of salvation and insures that we get to salvation. It is Grace that is built on the primary action of God, and the subsequent action of human beings. Our choice to accept Christ ought never be thought of as the first step in our salvation. Yes, we must choose, but what we choose is to make personally effective, the choosing that God has already done, that Grace has long since won. It's grace that finds us, sometimes even when we are not looking.

My story is way less dramatic, than Newton's, or probably yours; but no less meaningful. I have often said that on the night I was first confronted with the need and opportunity to be saved; was the first time I heard that I could or should be...saved. Though in retrospect, I know that there were praying grandmothers on each side, hopeful parents standing behind, and a faithful church that saw something in me, that I couldn't, or wouldn't, long before that night of decision. It was grace, that went before, grace that found me. How about you?

2. THE GRACE THAT SAVES US

"Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And Grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!

Let's make sure we are perfectly clear...there is a point of decision, a moment of belief. Whether we come to that moment instantaneously, or gradually over years of consideration, there is a moment in time, 'an hour I first believed', when each man, woman, boy and girl says yes to the finding grace, which then becomes the saving grace.

For Newton that moment began at the frail but faithful knee of his mother, and only reached its full impact that night, all alone at the helm of his slave ship. When did you get saved? Oh, maybe you can't remember the exact day (like me), but I remember the moment. There were no bells and whistles, no lightning and thunder made it distinctive; just the simple, faithful recognition that I had made a decision to belong to God. There were unanswered questions, unknown expectations, un-yielded sins, and unnerving prospects. But Grace has since answered each unknown. T'was grace that taught my heart to fear...and grace my fears relieved!

Paul got it right: *"For it is by grace that you have been saved..."* Eph. 1:8

3. THE GRACE THAT GROWS US

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

There is often quite a distance from the moment of salvation, to arriving at home; not always, but often. It is important to understand what Newton came to know, and subsequently included in his masterful hymn, that grace was not just necessary to save us, but grace also grows us. We ought to be growing more gracious as the days lengthen over us. The more we become like Christ, the more gracious ought to be our attitudes, our outlooks, and our actions.

Through all the dangers, toils and snares grace has called out to us; and though the journey is yet incomplete, it is grace that leads us onward. We don't just begin with grace, then live by works; we don't begin with faith, and then live by the law; we don't begin with mercy, and then live by justice;...it's all about grace.

I believe what Newton wanted to convey to his Bible Study and to us is the truthful reality that grace guides us all along the journey. Many people get stuck in saving grace, and never leave. Their testimony is only what happened 10 or 20 or 50 years ago, they have no ever-present daily reality of grace as a guiding force in the growth of their faith. Grace grows us.

It is also sad to me when I see in some, who have been saved by grace, who might even be growing by grace, who can't look at others with this same grace. It seems for some that grace is great when it comes for me, but grace is too extravagant for the likes of "you". There's some growing yet to do.

4. THE GRACE THAT SUSTAINS US

The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

Newton struggled throughout the remainder of his life with what his former life had meant and done for the people he had enslaved, and especially those he killed. He understood that their blood was on his hands, and ever in his mind. And though he fully appreciated the saving grace of God, and the growing grace of God, he came toward the end of his life to rely even more deeply on the fact that grace was the only thing that might sustain him as he endured the never-fading memories of his dubious past.

Many of us have pasts that haunt us, many of us have committed sins whose memories still cripple us, many of us have hurt others by our actions; and though forgiveness has been offered and received, we face the daily reality that we can't undo what we have done, or been...

It is only by the sustaining grace of God we can look tomorrow in the eye, and step forward. His Word of life; and grace is the only thing that secures our hope.

Many of us are facing difficulties, many of us have doubts and uncertainties; some of us are fighting disease riddled realities; and all of us can identify with David writing in I Chronicles...*you treat me as someone really great, when all the while you know what your servant is really like*...Grace, grace sustains us. Grace is the shield about us that protects us from the fiery devil-darts that would constantly remind us. Grace is our only portion, our only provision, and our only prospect of hope. Yes, grace finds us, saves us, grows us and sustains us. Where would we be if left to our own devices to deal with our crippled consciences, our mixed up memories, our messed up pasts? God's grace sustains us.

5. THE GRACE THAT PROMISES US

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

This promise is found in one word..."Shall", I shall possess, a life of joy and peace. Newton could declare definitively that the next life would be one of joy and peace, because grace promised it. This was no veiled 'heaven-speak', trying to convince himself of a reality he wished for; no, it was a reality that convinced him beyond the shadow of a doubt and beyond the shadow of death, that even as mortal life ceased, eternal life commenced! Grace, God's riches at Christ's expense, had become a life-time and life-long reality. Even after a sinful past, even after a misspent youth, even after slaving and sinning...God's grace found, saved, grew, sustained and (why should he doubt it now?) promised another life of joy and peace.

We typically end our singing of this hymn with a verse that John Newton didn't write:

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun;
We've no less days to sing God's praise,
Than when we first begun!

These words were penned first by Harriet Beecher Stowe in her 1852 novel: Uncle Tom's Cabin; and were copied and added later to this hymn. There are at least 8 other verses that have been attached to these original 6 through the years, but I at least want you to see the original ending as written by John Newton. Like the man himself, like the scripture text that inspired him...nothing flashy, just honest:

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here below,
Will be forever mine.

Grace is hard to define, easier to illustrate. When we don't get what we deserve...we call that grace. When we get what we don't deserve...we call that grace. When we are lost...and get found...we call that grace. When saved from hell and a wasted life...we call that grace. When we grow into something we know we can't produce...we call that grace. When we face the unknown and uncertain...with faith beyond our ability to produce it...we know that's grace. And when we come to the end of our days...and are anxious for what's next...what else can that be but grace? And when we've been there 10,000 years with no dimming of the SON, we will have not one less day, to sing in praise of God's grace, than the day we first begun. Let's start the singing now!

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