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## GRACE – IT'S AMAZING!

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*“Amazing Grace...how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...”*

Every time I sing that hymn, I wonder about the author...and his words...

I know I've done some wretched things in my life, as those of you who read my last Lenten Devotional know, but am I a “wretch?”

The dictionary defines a wretch as “an unfortunate or unhappy person; a despicable, or contemptible person.”

synonyms: scoundrel, villain, rogue, reprobate, criminal, miscreant, good-for-nothing; you get the picture...

Still...I don't quite see myself or anyone I know falling into those definitions. But the song IS definitely one of my all-time favorite hymns. What about you? “Amazing Grace” is the most beloved hymn of the last 200 years.

It is estimated to be performed **10 million times** each year and has been recorded onto **11,000 albums** by various artists across all genres.

It was referenced in Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slave novel, “*Uncle Tom's Cabin*” and had huge surges in popularity during two of our country's greatest crises – the **Civil War and the Viet Nam war**.

Between 1970 and 1972, Judy Collins' recording spent 67 weeks on the chart and peaked at number 5. Other great recording artists – Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson and Elvis recorded this song. Not so long ago, former president Barack O'Bama gave a moving rendition during the memorial service of Rev. Clementa Pinckney, one of the victims of the heinous shooting during bible study one evening at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. in Charleston, SC. where he served as their pastor.

Did you know that the words to this beloved hymn were written by a man named John Newton, who just so happened to be a slave trader?

Newton was born in 1725 in London to a Puritan mother who died two weeks before his 7<sup>th</sup> birthday, and a very stern father who was a sea captain who took his young son to sea at the early age of eleven. And from then on, Newton lived a life at sea.

As you well know from any pirate movies you might have seen over the years, most notably Captain Jack Sparrow of *Pirates of the Caribbean* fame, sailors were not noted for their refined good manners. But John Newton developed a reputation for profanity, crudeness, and vulgarity that even shocked many of his fellow sailors! He was known as "*the Great Blasphemer!*"

After many voyages and a reckless youth of drinking, gambling and carousing, Newton was impressed into the British navy hopefully to get some discipline. It didn't take long before he attempted to desert. He received 8 dozen (96) lashes and was demoted to the rank of common seaman. During that time, while serving on a slave ship called the "*Pegasus*," his fellow crew members, who never got along with John, left him in West Africa with a slave-trader named Amos Clowe. Clowe gave Newton to his African wife who treated him worse than she treated her other slaves, making him a servant to her slaves and nearly starving him to death.

John's mother had always prayed he would become a minister, and had taught him Bible scriptures and *Divine Songs for Children* by Isaac Watts. During this very low point in John's life, those early childhood teachings crept into his mind.

John's father sent a fellow sea-captain to look for his missing son and after a battle to rescue John, he was finally taken aboard the ship called the "*Greyhound*," to bring him back home. Once out to sea, a horrible storm hit and the ship was thrashing about in the north Atlantic off the coast of Ireland, for over a week and a half – its canvas sails were ripped to shreds and the wood on one side of the ship had splintered tearing a hole in the ship's hull.

None of the sailors thought they would survive, but they all continued to work the pumps trying to keep their ship afloat. On the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the storm, John Newton, too exhausted to work the pumps, was tied to the helm and tried to keep the ship on its course. Newton began to pray to God...so long a stranger to him...and miraculously a huge wave hit the ship just right and the cargo shifted filling the hole in the ship's hull and it was able to drift to safety!

Newton took this as a sign from God and has marked that event as his **conversion to Christianity**. But he didn't radically change his ways overnight – his reformation was more gradual. He did begin reading the Bible at this point and began to view his slave captives more sympathetically. He later said, *“I cannot consider myself to have been a believer in the full sense of the word, until a considerable amount of time later on.”*

John Newton had rejected his mother's teachings and had led many other sailors into unbelief. One would certainly believe he was beyond saving – even if the scriptures were true. But nonetheless, Newton's thoughts began to turn to Jesus. He got his hands on a copy of the New Testament and began to read. Luke 11:13 seemed to assure him that God might still hear him: *“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children: how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.”*

[Luke 11 teaches that one need not beg God for His Holy Spirit. He will give it to us generously, all that we need, to get us through every single day.](#)

That fateful day, March 21, 1748, when Newton was bound to the helm, was a day Newton remembered for the rest of his life – *“For on that day, the Lord sent from on high and delivered me out of deep waters.”*

Many years later, as an old man, Newton wrote in his diary on March 21, 1805 – 57 years after being tied to the helm – *“Not well able to write, but I endeavor to observe the return of this day with humiliation, prayer and praise.”* Only God's amazing grace could – and would – take a rude, profane, slave-trading sailor and transform him into a child of God. Newton never ceased to stand in awe of God's work in his life.

Even though Newton continued his profession of sailing and slave-trading for a time, his life was transformed. He began a disciplined schedule of Bible study, prayer, and Christian reading and tried to be a Christian example to the sailors under his command.

Newton continued to sell his fellow human beings making three voyages as the captain of two different slave ships. He suffered a stroke in 1754 and retired, but continued to invest in the business. It took him a long time to speak out against the Slave Trade. But finally, in 1788, 34 years after leaving it, he renounced his former slaving profession by publishing a scathing pamphlet titled, *“Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade.”* The booklet described the

horrific conditions on slave ships and Newton's apology for making a public statement so many years after participating in the trade stating: *"It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."*

The pamphlet was so popular it was reprinted several times and sent to every member of Parliament. Under the leadership of William Wilberforce, the English civil government outlawed slavery in Great Britain in 1807 and Newton lived to see it. The passage of the Slave Trade Act is depicted in a wonderful 2006 film aptly titled, (*Amazing Grace*).

Jonathan Aitken, a former Member of Parliament and cabinet minister in the British Government, writes in his latest biography [\*John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace\*](#): *"humanity will forever be in Newton's debt for mentoring Wilberforce through one of the most delicate and vulnerable phases of his life's journey."*

After Newton finally left slave-trading, he took a job as a tide surveyor in Liverpool, but he also began to think he'd been called into the ministry. Yes, his mother's prayers were answered – in 1764, at the age of 39, John Newton began his 43 year journey of preaching the Gospel of Christ when he was ordained as an Anglican priest.

After returning to England, Newton and his sweetheart, Mary Cattett married. At the end of his life, John wrote that their love *"equaled all that the writers of romance ever imagined!"* He spent his mornings in Bible study and his afternoons visiting parishioners. There were regular Sunday morning and afternoon services as well as meetings for children and young people. There was also a Tuesday evening prayer meeting which was always well attended.

For his Sunday evening services, Newton often composed a hymn which developed the lessons and scriptures for the evening. In 1779, 280 of his hymns were collected and combined with 68 hymns by Newton's friend and parishioner, William Cowper, and were published as the Olney hymns.

The most famous of all the hymns in that volume was one called *"Faith's Review and Expectation."* Over the years the title was shortened to the first two words of the hymn. We know it today as *"Amazing Grace."*

## So just what is grace?

It is said that, years ago, during a British Conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world gathered together and debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. All those great learned scholars began eliminating possibilities shouting out their ideas: **Incarnation?** No, other religions had different versions of God's appearing in human form.

**Resurrection?** No, again other religions had accounts of return from death.

The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis, one of the intellectual giants of the twentieth century and arguably one of the most influential writers of his day, wandered into the room. BTW, if you think you don't know who C. S. Lewis is, he wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*... ***"What's all the ruckus about?"*** he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions.

Lewis casually responded, ***"Oh, that's easy. It's grace."*** After some discussion, the conferees had to agree. **The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to be against every instinct of humanity.**

It is a constant theme in the Bible and the message of the gospel is the good news of God's grace. **It's important to know what grace is and to constantly search out what grace does in our lives.**

When I was researching this subject, I read pages and pages of interpretations of what grace is – lots of theological ideas, way over my head – and I knew I was not the right person to explain it to others in those terms. But, it boils down to this:

**Grace is an essential part of God's character.** It is closely related to God's benevolence, love and mercy. Simply put, it can be defined as ***"God's favor toward the unworthy,"*** or ***God's benevolence on the underserving.*** AHA!... So in His grace, God is willing to forgive us and bless us abundantly in spite of the fact that **we don't deserve to be treated so well, or dealt with so generously!**

A Christian lifestyle is not anything we can accomplish through our own efforts. Paul put it this way: *"You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's*

*accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.”* Paul repeatedly identified grace as the basis for his calling as an apostle.

To fully understand the concept of grace, we need to consider who we were without Jesus and who we’ve become with Him. We were born in sin and we were guilty of breaking God’s holy laws. We were enemies of God, deserving of death. We were unrighteous and without means of justifying ourselves. Spiritually we were destitute, blind, unclean and dead. Our souls were in peril of eternal punishment.

But then came grace. God extended his favor. Grace is what saves us. It is the essence of the gospel. It gives us victory over sin. Grace gives us eternal encouragement – good hope. Jesus is the embodiment of grace, coupled with truth.

Simply put...**GRACE IS A GIFT**. The Bible repeatedly calls it a gift and that analogy is important because it teaches us some key things about grace:

- 1) Anyone who has ever received a gift understands that a gift is different from a loan which you have to return or repay. The fact that grace is a gift means that nothing is owned in return!
- 2) There is no cost to the person who receives the gift. A gift is free to the person getting it, but it’s not free to the giver, who bears the expense. The gift of salvation costs us sinners nothing! But the price of this extravagant gift came at a great cost to our Lord Jesus who died in our place for our sins!
- 3) Once a gift has been given, ownership of the gift has transferred and it is now ours to keep. When a gift changes hands, the giver permanently relinquishes all rights to take back the gift in the future. God’s grace is ours forever.
- 4) In the giving of the gift, the giver voluntarily gives up something he owns – willingly parting with something that belongs to him so the recipient will gain from it. In essence, the giver becomes poorer so the recipient can become richer. The greatest gift was Jesus Christ.

**GRACE** — You need it. You can't live without it, but you can't buy it and you can't earn it. It only ever comes by means of a gift...and when you receive it, you immediately realize how much you needed it all along, and you wonder how you could've lived without it for so long.

**Finally, the Bible teaches us that grace is completely unmerited.** In a fallen world, filled with selfish, lost, fearful and rebellious people, **it's the one thing that everyone needs.** God's grace is the most powerful force in the universe. It reaches you where you are and takes you where God wants you to be. **It has the power to do something that nothing else can do: transform you at the casual core of who you are as a human being !**

Grace does not stop once we are saved – God is gracious to us for the rest of our lives, working within and upon us. The Bible encourages us with many other additional benefits that grace secures for every believer telling us:

Grace justifies us before a holy God.

Grace provides us access to God to communicate and fellowship with Him.

Grace wins us a new relationship of intimacy with God.

Grace disciplines and trains us to live in a way that honors God.

Grace grants us immeasurable spiritual riches.

Grace helps us in our every need.

Grace is the reason behind our every deliverance.

Grace preserves us and comforts, encourages, and strengthens us.

Grace is actively and continually working in the lives of God's people.

Grace is the ongoing, benevolent act of God working in us, without which, we can do nothing.

2<sup>ND</sup> HALF OF 3<sup>RD</sup> VERSE of "Amazing Grace"

*'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home."*

Grace is greater than our sin, more abundant than we expect, and too wonderful for words. ***Grace – it's simply amazing!***