

AMAZING GRACE (Eph. 2:1-10)

It is one of the most well-known hymns that was ever written. It has been sung by myriads of people including President Obama before a congregation in South Carolina. President Jimmy Carter also sang it with Willie Nelson. It was sung at President Reagan's funeral, and played on the bagpipes at President Gerald Ford's funeral. At President Nixon's funeral Billy Graham quoted it. ... It is sung by all kinds of people, - religious and no-religious. It is, of course, the hymn entitled "Amazing Grace".

It was first published away back in 1779, and was written from personal experience. Behind it lies the story of John Newton and how he came to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every testimony is a miracle. Every testimony is a work all of God. He finds us and, regardless of all the circumstances, He brings us unto Himself ... like the shepherd bringing home the lost sheep.

AMAZING GRACE

John Newton was born in London on July 24th 1725. His father was a shipmaster, and his mother was a Nonconformist believer. Sadly, she died when John was only six years old. After spending two years at boarding school, at the age of eleven he went to sea with his father. His father, - John Snr. - had already intended for his son to become a slave master on a plantation in Jamaica. ... Already, his life was mapped out before him without any thought of God.

However, instead of becoming a slave master on a plantation in Jamaica, young John became a captain of a slave ship. This was interrupted, though, when in 1743 he was captured and press-ganged into the Navy ... where he became promoted to a midshipman (equivalent to the rank of 2nd Lieutenant in the army) aboard HMS Harwich. The HMS Harwich was a 50-gun battleship which was eventually wrecked in 1760, in Cuba.

He did not like the navy though, and he tried to escape but was caught and punished. His captain had the eighteen-year-old stripped to the waist, tied to the grating and flogged ninety-six times ... and demoted to the rank of a common sailor. ... He hated the navy so much he requested to be put on a slave ship bound for West Africa. He totally resented discipline, - he simply could not control his badness!

And trouble seemed to follow him everywhere ... and, in those places where it didn't seem to be overtly following him ... he went looking for it. The captain of a slave ship couldn't control him so he took him to Sierra Leone, on the western coast of Africa, where he became the servant/slave of an African princess. He later wrote, he was "once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in West Africa".

Until the age of six years old, he had been brought up by a Christian mother ... When she died, his father did not continue that upbringing. Instead, he introduced his son to a life couched in all types of sin, and young John sank deeper and deeper into a hopeless abyss, out of which he could neither see or sought release.

He did not know it ... but, all this time, his father had been looking for him. The year was 1748, - he was twenty-three years of age, - and a sea captain friend of his father's offered to take him back home. Initially, John turned the offer down ... but then he was led to believe there was an inheritance waiting for him at home. ... There wasn't, but it was enough to get him on the boat back to England.

Their way back home took them out of West Africa and into the Atlantic Ocean, along the western coasts of Spain and France and up the western side and the north-western side of Ireland. Just off the coast of County Donegal there was such a mighty storm that so frightened the experienced sailor he thought he was going to die! He was absolutely petrified!

In the middle of the night he cried out to God as the ship began filling with water. He had never experienced such fear before! In fact, moments after he left the deck, the crewman who took his place on duty was swept overboard and drowned, - Newton later concluded that only the grace of God had saved him.

On his way back to Liverpool, he began to read his Bible and on May 10th 1748 the Gospel began to deal with him. He continued in the slave trade, but his life was changing. He gave up the old practices that previously had meant so much to him. ... The Lord had not saved him yet, but the battle was on ... He became a first mate (second in command to the captain) on another slave vessel on its way to the West Indies via the African Coast of Guinea, - he was on his way to pick up more slaves and bring them to the

West Indies. It was while in West Africa the Lord broke through and wonderfully saved him (1748-49).

By this time, he did not know any other life, and so he worked in the slave trade until the Lord intervened and John took a severe stroke, at the age of twenty-nine. ... God was directing him along another path ... He began to preach, and such a burden was laid upon him that he longed to enter the ministry. He applied to become a Church of England Minister in 1757 ... but they would not have him.

He applied to the Methodists, the Independents, the Presbyterians ... and then directly to the Bishop of Chester, and the Bishop of Lincoln ... and the Archbishops of Canterbury and York! ... He continued to persist until 17th June, 1764 when he was ordained to the ministry of the Church of England. He began in Olney, Buckinghamshire and served the Lord there for five years, after which he became the Minister of St Mary Wolnoth, Lombard Street in London. The Lord used him mightily, and his influence reached from the streets of London into the Houses of Parliament, where among his friends was William Wilberforce, the leader of the movement to end the slave trade.

William Cowper was another close friend, and Cowper encouraged him in his writing of hymns, - "Glorious things of Thee are spoken", "How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds", "Approach, my soul, the mercy seat" ... and of course, "Amazing Grace". ... God had followed this "wretch" across the oceans and the continents ... and the Lord would not let him out of His sight ... He persisted until John Newton was wonderfully saved, - "**Amazing grace** ... I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see".

THE GIFT OF AMAZING GRACE

John Newton did not deserve to be saved. He was as bad a man as you could possibly get. He was all out for himself ... He didn't care about anyone else ... just as long as he got what he wanted. He used and abused people ... not only the slaves taken from their homes in Africa. He used his fellow-crew members, his so-called friends ... no one mattered in his life, but him. He was a rascal! He had no one in his life, - his mother was dead, his father started him off in the downward track, and there was no one who cared sufficiently to lift him out of it ... except God.

Sin takes you places you never wanted or intended to go ... but when it gets a hold of you, you become its slave. You don't know how to break free. It destroys your ability to look for a way out. When it gets you, it keeps you! ... And it has you from the moment you enter into this world, and it does not want to let you go!

And at the tender age of eleven John Newton entered a world where he would have broken the heart of his mother, if she had lived. At that young age he would never have known how far along the filthy path he would travel. At first it was attractive and appealing, - he was 'one of the boys', and very quickly he 'rose up the ranks' of depravity and wickedness. He couldn't have said two words without at least one of them being an expletive! ... How does someone reach so low? How do they become so degenerate? Is it only a certain type of person that becomes such a wretch?

No, even 'good' people are victims of sin. Paul had been **Phil. 3:5** an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; **6** Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. ... Exemplary! ... You and I could not have matched his self-righteousness. He was most surely a source of pride to his parents, and yet he came to discover, **Rom. 7:24** **O wretched man that I am!**

Paul did not visit the places John Newton visited. He did not rob, or cheat, or lie, get drunk, or chase after women ... but Paul was a lost hell-deserving sinner every bit as much as John Newton!

Newton and Paul were sociologically at two opposite ends of the scale ... and yet both of them were equally sinners ... strangers to God and His grace. And then one day, God interrupted their lives. God entered where He was not invited. He met Paul on the road to Damascus ... and He met Newton in the ocean off Donegal.

Do you remember where God first began His meeting with you? Do you remember the circumstances ... what was happening in your life at that time? Maybe you cannot remember the day, or the hour, or the very moment ... but you can remember how He came along and He caught your attention.

Previously, the Gospel was an old story, of no relevance to you. It was a story for others ... but you weren't interested. But when God came to the

door of your heart, and He started knocking ... He opened that door which was previously shut to Him, and He offered you a Gift you could not refuse, and you found yourself reaching out and receive His offer of ... **Amazing Grace ... the Gift of Amazing Grace.**

THE AMAZING GIFT OF GRACE

... And now, as you look at that Gift ... you feel you are so unworthy. What did you ever do for God to love you to such a vast degree? Why should He look upon you?

Yes, you might have been brought up like Paul in a religious family ... taught to go to Sunday School, taught to read your Bible, learn the memory verses, brought along to church ... you might even have had Christian parents who taught you to love God ... Or you might have had something more in common with John Newton. You were a real rebel, and you would not listen to anyone, and you didn't have any Christian influence. You were stubborn and intent in going your own way, and living life how you chose.

But the Lord saved you ... *why?!* He owed you nothing ... and yet He sent Christ into this world to die for you. The Lord Jesus bore the shame of the cross, surrounded by people who hated Him. He was rejected by His Heavenly Father ... and all because He loved you. He cried ... and they all heard Him. His blood flowed where the crown of thorns had pierced His brow ... where the nails had been driven into His hands and His feet. The sun in the sky hardened the blood on His back where He had received the lashings. ... **The amazing Gift of Grace** was given in all its fullness on the day when Jesus died at Calvary.

If Jesus had not died for us we would be facing a lost eternity in Hell. ... And what could we have done?! ... What would we have done? ... If Christ had not met with us, I don't believe it would have bothered us! We would have kept going on ... unaware of the danger, not interested in listening to any of the warnings ... We had no worries and no concerns of what happened in the life after this life!

But then the most beautiful news we needed to hear began to penetrate our mind and heart ... and it *dawned* on us that Christ had died on the cross to take away our sins. And now, as you look back on it, you can see how the work God the Father planned in eternity was accomplished by His Son Who paid the price of our redemption on Calvary.

We could never begin to plumb the depths of God's grace in the salvation of a single soul ... be it a sinner such as righteous Saul of Tarsus or a sinner so repulsive as John Newton. ... All sin *condemns*, but only the blood of Christ *cleanses* ... **Amazing Grace!**

CONCLUSION

The Gift of Amazing Grace ... God is its Author, God is its Planner, and God is its Applicator ... and **the Amazing Gift of Grace** ... God considered us worthy of the life and death of His Beloved! And God continues to save lost souls every single day ... and He will continue saving souls until His Son returns to this earth.

You cannot save yourself. You cannot do what it took Christ to do at Calvary. If you could have made yourself right with God ... there would have been no need for Him to suffer and die. ... **Amazing Grace** is a story only God can tell in all its entirety, - for He wrote the book! ... And yet the true rendering of **Amazing Grace** is a song He has privileged to be sung by His people for whom Calvary was planned.

Amazing Grace ... The Gift of Amazing Grace ... and The Amazing Gift of Grace. ... Make sure you know Christ, and that you have invited Him into your life to be your Saviour and Lord ... and then the song will never leave you ... not even throughout eternity because ...

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.