

Amazing Grace!

Ephesians 2:8-10

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The hymn “Amazing Grace” is one of the most popular hymns in the English-speaking world, certainly the most popular in the United States. It has been played on bagpipes and flutes, and sung by congregations in great cathedrals and tiny house churches and at brush arbor revivals, by opera singer Jessye Norman and folk singer Judy Collins, by rock bands and Sacred Harp singers (White and Black), by slaves and soldiers and prisoners, and by all of us. There is just something about this hymn. It brings back memories and connections that are deeper than words, and it promises God’s healing touch when nothing else will avail.

Do you know the story of this hymn? I thought I knew it, until I looked more closely this week. John Newton was an English sailor, born in 1725. Son of the commander of a merchant vessel, he was apprenticed on his father’s ship when he was just 11. Growing up among sailors, he soon became a determined libertine – famous even in that rough ship’s culture for his excesses with women and alcohol. He swore beyond what other sailors even attempted. As a young man – and no longer on his father’s ship – Newton mocked his ship’s captain by writing obscene poems and songs about him and then getting all the other sailors to join in. He mocked Christians, too, and he denounced God as a myth. Newton liked his bawdy reputation as a sinner, and was ready to take himself and the whole world to hell, he said.

Newton passed from one ship to another, wearing out his welcome in each crew, landing eventually on the slaving ship *Pegasus*. He made such a nuisance of himself there that in 1745, the captain and crew just left him in Africa with a slave trader, and Newton became enslaved to that trader’s wife, a Princess Peye of the Sherbro people. He was a slave!

Three years later, Newton was rescued by the captain of an English ship. On the return trip to England, on March 10, 1748, the ship ran into a violent storm. A huge wave crashed on the deck, sweeping one of the crew away to sea, where Newton himself had been standing only seconds before. He lashed himself to the ship’s pump to keep from being swept overboard, and as he desperately baled water, he cried out, “Lord, have mercy upon us!”

They did survive the storm, and it took two more weeks for the battered ship and starving crew to make port in Ireland. In those two weeks, Newton did a lot of thinking, about his life, about the storm, and about his cry to God, “Lord, have mercy upon us!” He thought he didn’t believe in God, but the storm proved he did. Newton began to ask if he was worthy of God’s mercy, or if he was in any way redeemable. He wasn’t proud of his sins anymore. He felt like a wretch.

Newton started to reform himself – but very slowly. He began to court Polly Catlett, whose parents were naturally concerned about his degenerate reputation. So, he stopped swearing. It was the only immorality from which he could free himself. He also managed to become a little less insubordinate at work, resolving to submit to authority for Polly’s sake.

He continued sailing on slaving ships, eventually becoming captain of one of them. Back and forth he sailed from England to Africa to the British West Indies, carrying precious children of God as cargo, stacked side by side like logs in the ship’s hold. He had once been a slave himself, and yet he willingly enslaved others.

In between sailings, Newton and Polly were married, and back he went to Africa again. This lasted until 1755, seven years after he was rescued from slavery in Africa, seven years after the storm that scared

profanity out of him and made him reconsider his life, seven years ... Newton couldn't do it anymore. He was thirty years old.

He left the slave trade, and left the sea altogether and became an abolitionist. He worked as a customs agent by day and taught himself theology and Latin and Greek at night. In 1764 he was ordained as an Anglican priest. Once a slave in body and a slave in spirit – a “wretch,” as he would say – Newton was now transformed by the grace of God. He had been sure he was irredeemable, and we who hear of his life from this distance in time and space might almost agree with that assessment. But he learned that God found him worthy of redemption. Newton wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace,” about the grace he had received – God’s willingness to forgive and to redeem and to transform even him.

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We can't earn grace. The author of Ephesians writes:

... because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.... For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Grace is God's free gift to us, to all of us who can never earn that grace, no matter how hard we try or how miserably we fail. This is why the hymn “Amazing Grace” speaks so eloquently to prisoners, whose lives have gone so far astray through their own choices and actions. I have heard prisoners describe the power of that moment when the door closes and they are face-to-face with themselves at last, and then they find that God is with them even there, and that somehow God finds them worthy of love. This is grace.

Sometimes we live inside a different kind of prison – like addiction or mental illness – from which we can find no escape. Even there, behind those bars that we did not choose, God can touch us with moments of peace and love and wholeness that remind us that we are God's own. This is grace.

Sometimes we face circumstances that are not of our own making, that require terrible choices of us. We do this especially to soldiers, people who go in our name into violence and danger, where there is no way to make a good choice. Live or die. Kill or be killed. Choose who lives and who does not. Military veterans sometimes describe the injury to their souls that persists long after combat is over. And God can reach even to that dark place, saying, “You are still my precious child, and I love you.” This is grace.

Sometimes we are the author of the messes we are living in. Sometimes we are unwitting participants in them. Sometimes we are broken in ways that we never chose. It doesn't matter. We all need God's transforming power that makes us whole and calls us onward toward whole and holy lives. This is grace.

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When we sing “Amazing Grace” we remember the times we have sung it as children. We remember singing it at the funerals of those we have loved. We feel its melody in our bones and in our souls. And sometimes we sing “Amazing Grace” when we are ready to open ourselves to the bright and healing light of God's pure love. Sometimes we sing “Amazing Grace” because that grace is all we have to hold onto. Sometimes we sing it because grace is the deepest desire of our hearts and the gift that only God can give.

Amen