

Amazing Grace, My Chains are Gone

If you would happen to take a walk and found yourself in a small cemetery of a parish churchyard in Olney, England, you may want to take a few minutes to look for the granite tombstone with the following inscription: ***“John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy.”*** Yes, mention the name John Newton, and there will be some that say “Ah ha”, you know, the man who was once lost but then was found, who wrote the lyrics for the hymn Amazing Grace. This fitting testimonial, written by Newton himself prior to his death, describes aptly the unusual and colorful life of this man, that provide the world with the words of this hymn.

Born on July 24, 1725, his early years were formed by his mother, a Godly woman who died when John was not quite seven years of age. With his father remarrying, John spent several years in a formal education setting away from home. At age eleven, he joined his father’s ship and begin life as a seaman. Those early years were one continuous round of rebellion and debauchery. After serving on several ships as well as working for a period of time on the islands and mainland of the West African coast of Sierra Leon collecting slaves for sale to visiting traders, Newton eventually became a captain of his own slave ship. Needless to say, the capturing, selling and transporting of black slaves to the plantations in the West Indies and America was a cruel and vicious way of life.

However, on a homeward voyage, while he was attempting to steer the ship through a particularly violent storm, he experienced what he was to refer to later as his “great deliverance.” The message that John received from the book, Imitation of Christ, along with the frightening experience at sea were used by the Holy Spirit to sow the seeds of Newton’s eventual conversion and personal acceptance of Christ as his Savior.

He recorded in his journal that when all seemed lost and the ship would surely sink, he exclaimed, “Lord, have mercy upon us.” Later in his cabin he reflected on what he had said. He began to believe that God had addressed him through the storm and that grace had begun to work for him. For the rest of his life, he observed the anniversary of May 10, 1748 as the day of his conversion, a day of humiliation in which he subjected his will to a higher power.

For the next several years he continued as a slave captain, trying to justify his work by seeking to improve conditions as much as possible, even holding public worship service for his hardened crew of thirty each Sunday. Eventually, however, he felt convicted of the inhuman aspects of this work and became a strong and effect crusader against slavery.

It was during his days as a sailor that he had begun to educate himself, learning Latin, among other subjects. For the next 5 years, he worked as a clerk at the Port in Liverpool for the next nine years, where he came to know George Whitefield, deacon in the Church of England, and leader of the Calvinistic Methodist Church. It was during this period Newton felt the call of God increasingly to preach the gospel and began to study diligently for the ministry that met and came to admire the Wesley's. However, he decided to stay within the established Anglican Church rather than to join forces with those choosing a different path.

John decided to become a minister and applied to the Archbishop of York for ordination, however his request was refused. He persisted and at the age of thirty-nine, he was subsequently ordained by the Bishop of Lincoln and begin his first pastorate at the little village of Olney, near Cambridge, England. Especially effective was the use of the story of his early life and conversion experience, which he told often. In addition to preaching for the stated service in his own church, Newton would hold services regularly in any large building he could secure in the surrounding area. This was an unheard-of practice for an Anglican clergyman of that day. Wherever he preached, large crowds gathered to hear the "Old Converted Sea Captain". Newton's church became so crowded that the church had to be enlarged.

A practice that Newton started at his church in Olney, was the singing of hymns that expressed the simple, heartfelt faith of his preaching rather than the staid singing of the Psalms and Psalter which was practiced in other Anglican churches. When he couldn't find enough available hymns for his purpose, he began writing his own. It was during this time that he enlisted the aid of his friend and neighbor, William Cowper a well-known writer of classic literature of this period. It was through this collaboration that they set to write a new hymn for each of their weekly prayer meetings. Amazing Grace was probably written for one of these weekly services.

Amazing Grace resides in a sphere of public awareness that few hymns can claim. Some think it's a folk song. Whereas some would be surprised to find that it is an eighteenth-century hymn. According to Hymnary.org, Amazing Grace is published in over 1300

hymnals. By comparison, the Christmas classic, Silent Night is listed in less than 600, Holy, Holy, Holy is found in just over 1500, and “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing” is in just over 1600. A big difference is that while these other three songs though popular, would not be known and sung so broadly and in so many musical styles beyond Christian worship as Newton’s hymn. For example, few hymns have made the Top 10 Hits List, as “Amazing Grace” did in 1971 when Judy Collins recorded it in a somber hymn like style as the song on her album by the same name. Hearts have been touched by the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards with their rendition on Bagpipes. Twenty years ago, on September 11th, churches across our nation turned to this song for comfort and support after the attaches in NYC.

Undoubtedly, the most representative expression of John Newton’s life is his appealing hymn “Amazing Grace”. It’s evident that the words have been inspired by God and taken from Biblical Text. From the beginning, we see the scriptural undergirding of stanza one is remarkable. The concept of “grace” echoes beautifully ***Ephesians 2:8-9: ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.*** While it may be overreaching to ascribe too much direct autobiographical influence in this hymn, one can well imagine that Newton may have inserted an example from his days as a seafaring captain with a cargo of enslaved Africans weathering stormy seas that threatened the lives of all on board. Indeed, it is likely that Africans were lost on every middle passage voyage from their homeland to the New World.

On May 4, 1972, in Grand Saline Texas, the world was blessed with the birth of yet another gifted and talented young man. One who grew and learned to play his guitar that he received as a gift from his father. At age 11, he began to play along with Willie Nelson recordings, and at 14, he composed his first worship song. In 2006 **Christopher Dwayne Tomlin** along with Louis Giglio released Amazing Grace with a twist that was so remarkable that with their additions, both songs remain popular. Some hymnals will include six stanzas however most contain just four. Today we want to look at this lesser-known reworked version.

Chris will admit that **“he never set to take the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ and add something to it-anybody would be crazy to do that! It’s only the greatest song ever written.”**

Instead, he will recount a plane ride whereon he had a chance encounter with a friend who told him about some acquaintances who were making a movie about **William Wilberforce** called **Amazing Grace to be released in 2007**. His friend mentioned that the producers of the film were wondering if Tomlin would be willing to “do something” with the hymn of the same name.

After briefly recounting Wilberforce’s work toward abolishing the slave trade in Europe, Tomlin explains the life of **“Wilberforce’s mentor,” John Newton, who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace”** after his conversion and abandonment of his career as a slave trader. While pondering the proposal, Tomlin read about the history of John Newton and reflected on the depth of the lyrics in their context of slavery. Out of this reflection, he had an epiphany; **“So these words just started flowing one night – my chains are gone, I’ve been set free, my God, my savior, has ransomed me -”**

It’s interesting note, how do you pay a ransom for someone that is a slave? If we want to admit it or not, we all are slaves to something. And it is through the Grace of God that the chains of our addiction are broken and we are set free. We should stand with an unwavering confidence in the absolute sovereignty of God, that the opportunity is there for us to be forgiven. That no matter what we’ve done in the past, all the sorrow, the hurt, the pain, the anger can be put behind us so as to inflect confidence in God’s inevitable acts of justice in the world, rather than on the need for human partnership with God in those acts. If nothing else is true, we see how timeless God is in providing words that will touch hearts throughout generations and the message of God’s grace and the power of it are constantly new and needed. If we are saved by the grace of God, the chains that have bound us are really gone, and we truly have been set free.