

SERMON STARTERS

GRACE, IT'S AMAZING!

The words of John Newton's song, "Amazing Grace," have found a special place in minds and hearts of people both inside and outside the church. While the tune is popularly recognized and the words are generally remembered, nevertheless, the scriptural truth of the amazing grace of God is not understood or experienced by everyone who sings the song.

The average hymn book contains only four or five stanzas of the original hymn. The original consisted of thirteen verses. The entire hymn is a theological autobiography, rich in Bible doctrine, exalting Jesus Christ and underscoring the grace of God.

John Newton, who was saved out of a most vile and violent life, was, at one time, a slave-ship captain. He became an ordained minister in the Anglican church. He died in 1807 at the age of 82. The first verse of his famous song, which is not usually in hymn books, is as follows:

*"In evil long I took delight, unawed by shame or fear;
Till a new object met my sight, and stopped my wild career."*

He attributed the end of his "wild career" to the intervention of the God of grace. Grace. What is it about "grace" that is so amazing? That is a good question and perhaps a review of Ephesians 2:1-9 will explain grace so amazing, so divine.

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But 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—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." (Eph. 2:1-9niv)

Grace is "unmerited favor" or "kindness sovereignly bestowed by God." Grace is the unmerited favor and blessing freely and fully given to us even though we do not deserve it and cannot earn it. Another definition worthy of note is: "God's grace is His active favor bestowing the greatest gift upon those who have deserved the greatest punishment." The word is used over 150 times in the New Testament. Peter calls God "the God of all grace." In the above verses from Ephesians 2 we see God, by His grace, reaching us, rescuing us and raising us. Look at each of these actions as follows:

I. THE DEPTHS TO WHICH GRACE EXTENDS TO US.

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time,

gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.” (Eph. 2:1-3)

Notice where we were when God’s grace was extended to us:

A. Dead in sins – that’s how God found us:

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins....”

B. Directed by Satan – that’s how the devil hounds us:

“in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”

C. Dominated by the flesh – that’s how the flesh bound us:

“All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

Truly, *“Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save...”* (Isa.59:1niv) No one is beyond the grasp of God! I have heard many say, “I’m too great a sinner for God to love me.” Or, “I’ve done so much evil that God would not save me,” etc. Not true! No one is beyond the reach of the almighty arm of God. God’s grace reaches to the lowest depths. His reach is extensive.

*“In evil long I took delight, unawed by shame or fear;
Till a new object met my sight, and stopped my wild career.*

*I saw One hanging on a tree in agonies and blood;
Who fixed His languid eyes on me as near His cross I stood.*

*Sure, never till my last breath can I forget that look;
It seemed to charge me with His death, though not a word He spoke.*

*My conscience felt and owned the guilt, and plunged me in despair;
I saw my sins His blood had shed, and helped me to nail Him there.”*

II. THE DELIVERANCE THAT GRACE EFFECTS WITHIN US.

“But 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—it is by grace you have been saved” – AND, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Eph.2:4-5; 8-9)

We see in these verses the effect that grace has on its recipient:

A. It changes from death to life - *“made us alive with Christ even when we were dead”*

B. It changes from lost to saved – *“it is by grace you have been saved”*

C. It changes from faithlessness to faith – *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith....”*

Notice the thrilling trilogy that reveals the nature of God in verses 4 and 5. He is:

- The God of love - v. 4
- The God of mercy - v.4
- The God of grace - v.5.

He specializes in extreme makeovers changing sinners to saints! This John Newton experienced:

*Alas, I knew not what I did, but all my tears were vain;
Where could my trembling soul be hid, for I, the Lord, had slain!*

*A second look He gave that said, "I freely all forgive!"
"This blood is for thy ransom paid, I died that thou mayest live!"*

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that save a wretch like me,
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!*

III. THE DISTINCTION WITH WHICH GRACE ENDOWS US.

"And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus." Also, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."
(Eph. 2:6-7; 10)

Can there be a greater story than what takes place in a person as the result of the grace of God? I think not! We have heard of many "rags to riches" stories – death to life stories – lost and found stories. But none that can match, to say nothing of excelling, the grandeur of the grace narrative!

In the above verses we are told that God's grace:

- A. Elevates us** – *"And God raised us up with Christ...."*
- B. Enthrones us** – *"and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus...."*
- C. Employs us** – *"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works"*

It is no wonder that John Newton and many another have found God's grace to be absolutely amazing!

*Thro' many dangers, toils and snares I have already come;
'Tis grace hath bro't me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*

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

*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.*

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow, the sun forbear to shine,
But God Who called me here below shall be forever mine.*

*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'd first begun*

Illustration:

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. So, they began eliminating possibilities. 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 wandered into the room. "What's the ruckus about?" he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. Lewis 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."

Its free! There is nothing you can do to earn it. There is no way you can work for it. It is a gift. *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast."* (Eph. 2:8)

John Newton discovered and experienced the free grace of God. It is evidenced by the drastic overhaul of his life: reached, rescued and raised from the depths to the heights in Christ Jesus. He wanted all to know and therefore, engraved on his tombstone in the parish graveyard at Olney, England, is this inscription, which he wrote:

"John Newton, 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."

God's Grace is amazing as Newton so accurately stated in the song he wrote:

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Till a new object met my sight, and stopped my wild career.*

*I saw One hanging on a tree in agonies and blood;
Who fixed His languid eyes on me as near His cross I stood.*

*Sure, never till my last breath can I forget that look;
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