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THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY OF AMAZING GRACE





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TOM NETTLES

Introduction:

Exposition of “Amazing Grace:” An Appreciation of 250 Years of Edifying Influence

The 250th anniversary of the first singing of “Amazing Grace” was January 2023. It was written by John Newton and sung by his parish congregation in Olney, England. This Journal is committed to a theological exposition of that hymn. I have written the discussion of verse three and a biographical sketch of Newton. My pastor, Cam Potts, who preached a series of sermons on “Amazing Grace” at the beginning of 2023, has written how a study of the hymn energized certain pastoral commitments. A seasoned musician and profound theological thinker, Jim Carnes, worship pastor at Southwoods Baptist Church in Germantown, Tennessee, has provided an enlightening discussion of verse one. Paul Taylor gives an edifying exposition of verse 2 and includes a doctrinal investigation of the concept of the fear of the Lord: “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear.” Erik Smith, a theologically and historically trained business man, discusses verse four by looking at how God’s promise [“The Lord has promised good to me”] is worked out in the various aspects of his providence. How pleasant and assuring it is to consider the truths of which Erik reminds us. Joe Crider, Dean of the School of Church Music at The Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has taken on verse five and the often fearful impressions given concerning the time “when this flesh and heart shall fail.” He gives us a look at the veil of death and the pleasant prospects that God’s saving and preserving grace present to believers. Joe Nesome, pastor at First Baptist Church in Jackson, Louisiana, looks at verse six with a peek into the dissolution of this present temporal order (“The earth shall soon dissolve like snow”) that will be replaced by an eternal fellowship with the living God.



CAM POTTS

Pastoral Reflections on a Pastor's Hymn

There are not many events from the year 1773 that still affect our lives today. There are not many people who were around in 1773 that are still remembered today. But I can guarantee you that on any given Sunday, Christians in various churches around the world are singing a song written by an ordinary pastor in 1773. “Amazing Grace” has been advertised as a song written by a former slave trader and as a song written by an abolitionist (both of which are true), but it should not be lost on us that John Newton wrote this hymn as a pastor. And in this 250-year-old hymn, Newton continues to pastor God’s people today with truths to anchor our faith and lessons to guide our ministries.

Here are a few reflections on the way “Amazing Grace” might shape our own walk with Christ and service to Him.

Written with Humility

The name of this hymn is more well-known than its author, and that’s exactly how Newton would want it to be. When he sat in his study on a cold winter day in the small town of Olney to write this hymn, he never dreamed it would go on to become the most famous hymns in history. He wasn’t thinking about the world; he was thinking about Olney. Newton never dreamed this song would one day be sung by world leaders; he was thinking about his own congregation.

Newton wrote 'Amazing Grace' with the goal to honor Christ and edify His people. He didn't write for fame but to serve.

Every pastor (and every Christian) must always be on guard against the tendency to do things for our own glory. We may not have global or even national aspirations, but we all desire recognition or credit from someone for the work we do. We all, like the disciples, have spent our energy arguing (even inwardly) over which of us is the greatest (Luke 22:24). Newton knew this battle in his own heart as he once wrote, "Self likes to do great things, but grace teaches us to do little things with a great spirit – that is for the Lord's sake." We should pray that the same amazing grace that saves sinners like us would also grow a humble heart in each of us that cries out with John the Baptist, "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30)

Written with Faith

The shape of "Amazing Grace" flowed out of a long-established habit of Newton's. At the beginning of every new year, he would dedicate time to both look back over the past year reflecting on what the Lord had done and look forward to the next year dreaming about what the Lord may do. In Newton's words, he was looking to "past mercy and future hope". In fact, Newton's original title for "Amazing Grace" was "Faith's Review and Expectation". Newton knew the importance of anchoring our present experience in God's past faithfulness and future promises, and he lived, pastored, and wrote with the wide view of God's work in mind.

The words of "Amazing Grace" carry you across the entire path of the Christian life. One author describes this hymn as "a collective autobiography for every Christian. 'Amazing Grace' is perceptive biblical theology, embraced by one man deeply moved by his own redemption, articulated for corporate worship." If you want to know where your life and ministry have been, currently are, and are going, allow Mr. Newton to tell you the story of God's grand redemptive work. He is the God of our past, present, and future. He is the Ancient of Days. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Newton's faith-filled reflection should prompt our own: Is our view of the past characterized more by nostalgia and regret or God's mercy and faithfulness? Is our view of the present shaped more by our mood and circumstances or by God's presence and truth? Are our hopes for the future built on the world's temporary joys or God's eternal promises?

John Newton knew that faithfulness to Christ over a lifetime could only grow out of a wide view of God's work. Living with this wide view adjusts our outlook on what a life of faith looks like for ourselves and for those we serve. As Newton once wrote, "Remember, the growth of a believer is not like a mushroom, but like an oak, which increases slowly indeed but surely. Many suns,

showers, and frosts, pass upon it before it comes to perfection; and in winter, when it seems dead, it is gathering strength at the root. Be humble, watchful, and diligent in the means, and endeavor to look through all and fix your eye upon Jesus, and all shall be well.”

Written with Truth

“Amazing Grace” was one of many hymns written by Newton over the course of his ministry. In their famous Olney Hymns, John Newton and William Cowper compiled almost 350 hymns, and 280 of them were written by Newton.

His goal was never hymn writing for the sake of hymn writing. He originally began the practice of writing hymns to accompany his sermons with the goal of making God’s Word more accessible for his people. The small village of Olney was made up of mostly poor and uneducated laborers, and Newton’s hymns put theological truths in a form that was both accessible and memorable for his people. “Amazing Grace”, like many of Newton’s hymns, is written with great simplicity. Most of the words in the song are only 1 syllable! Newton demonstrated great love and care for his congregation.

The specific truths that he wanted to communicate to the people of Olney through “Amazing Grace” flowed out of 1 Chronicles 17. King David’s prayer in these verses sparked Newton’s own “review and expectation”, and he wanted to guide the faith of his church in the same direction. This connection to Scripture is one of the most important lessons of this famous hymn. The lyrics of “Amazing Grace” are not a compilation of Newton’s own thoughts and opinions; they are expressions deeply rooted in biblical truth. His own active relationship with the Lord through the Bible was the source of his ministry to his people. For Newton, ministry was not utilitarian, it was devotional. God’s Word was not simply a tool used for pastoring people, it was a treasure that led to abiding in Christ. As we learn to enjoy Jesus in our daily lives and serve Him in ministry, may we say with the psalmist, “I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil.” (Psalm 119:162)

Written with Sincerity

Though “Amazing Grace” is one of the most famous songs of all time, the circumstances of the day Newton first introduced the song have remained in the background. The story of January 1, 1773 demonstrates the honesty of Newton’s experience of God’s grace and the sincerity of his commitment to express that grace to others.

In Newton’s journal entry from that day, after preaching from 1 Chronicles 17 and singing “Amazing Grace” for the first time ever, he wrote the following entry in his journal, “I preached this forenoon from 1 Chronicles 17:16-17. Hope I was enabled to speak with some

liberty, but found my own heart sadly unaffected.” Newton’s honesty here should be a great encouragement to every Christian that senses dullness within your heart. On the day that John Newton introduced what would become the world’s most renowned hymn, his heart was “sadly unaffected”. To some this may raise a red flag, but it should do the exact opposite. Newton’s freedom to acknowledge his flat heart only serves to further spotlight the beauty of God’s grace. It is not a sign that his lyrics were insincere but proves their sincerity. How amazing that God graciously chose to save sinners knowing our hearts will be slow to respond even after experiencing such a great salvation.

On top of the condition of Newton’s soul on that cold day in 1773 is the state of his friendship with William Cowper. The renowned English poet was one of John Newton’s closest friends. Cowper was in the service at St. Peter and St. Paul that morning. He heard Newton preach from 1 Chronicles 17, and he sang “Faith’s Review and Expectation” with the congregation. But, unfortunately, this was the last time Cowper would attend a worship service for the rest of his life. Cowper experienced seasons of deep depression, and as he walked home from church that day he felt himself slipping into another bout of depression. His mind drew darker as he struggled home. Once home, he wanted to express his faith in the midst of his emotion and doubt, so he sat down and wrote another now famous hymn, “God Moves In A Mysterious Way”. As Cowper continued to sink into a downward spiral, Newton was called to Cowper’s house that evening. Cowper had attempted suicide, and Newton arrived, cleaned him up, and continued to show his love and care for his friend by visiting him many times in the weeks and months to come. It is not far fetched to think that Newton had Cowper in mind as he wrote and sang “Amazing Grace”.

John Newton was no stranger to suffering throughout his life. From Newton’s perspective, the most significant trial he ever endured was the death of his dear wife, Polly. On the 1-year anniversary of her death, Newton wrote in his journal, “At length, the trial which I most dread came upon me...My right hand was not chopped off at a stroke...It was sawn off by slow degrees; it was an operation of weeks and months; almost every following week more painful than the preceding. But did I sink...The Lord strengthened me, and I was strong...I felt as much as I could well bear, but not too much; and to this hour I only stand because I am upheld.” Through his own circumstances and through his care for people like William Cowper, Newton learned the sustaining power of God’s grace.

Written with Wonder

Finally, the words of “Amazing Grace” were the result of a heart that was in awe of Jesus. Newton wondered at God’s salvation. He never got over God’s grace. No matter how many hymns he

composed or how many letters he wrote or how many visits he made, Newton worked hard to keep his focus on Jesus, “Every step along the path of life is a battle for the Christian to keep two eyes on Christ.” This is true in both life and ministry.

All of us are tempted to let our focus drift to what we have done for Jesus rather than what Jesus has done for us. We would do well to heed Jesus’ words to his followers in Luke 10:20, “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” Jesus’ mission for us should thrill our hearts more than our ministry for Him. Newton knew this doesn’t come easy for any Christian. He once wrote, “I find that to keep my eye simply upon Christ, as my peace, and my life, is by far the hardest part of my calling.”

Every day of the Christian life is a day we need God’s grace. The Christian life is started by grace, continued by grace, and completed by grace. Newton wondered at this grace day after day all the way until his last day. As he approached the end of his earthly life, 34 years after he wrote “Amazing Grace”, he told one of his friends who stopped by to see him, “I am packed and sealed and waiting for the post.” Newton’s wonder created within him a deep longing for glory. He once said about heaven, “If I ever reach heaven, I expect to find three wonders there: to see some I did not expect to see there, to miss some I did expect to see there, and, the greatest wonder of all, to find myself there.” May God’s grace never cease to be amazing to us, and may our wonder only increase as we get closer to the day when we will see our gracious Savior’s face.

Though many songs, events, and characters of 1773 have long since faded into history – including much of Newton’s own work and ministry – the eternal truths of gospel grace continue to echo forward for every generation. Newton would likely prefer to be forgotten as long as Christ is remembered. Some of Newton’s final and most famous words lead us to this very truth, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!” 250 years later, His grace is still amazing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Cam Potts was born and raised in LaGrange, and he came to know Christ through the ministry of LaGrange Baptist. He received his Bachelor’s degree from Eastern Kentucky University and went on to earn a Master’s from Southern Seminary. Cam currently serves as the Senior Pastor of LaGrange Baptist Church. He is married to Kerry-Lyn, and they have 3 kids: Cooper, Libby, and Emmett.



TOM NETTLES

John Newton: A Brief Biography

During his final days in December 1807, John Newton said, “What a thing it is to live under the shadow of the wings of the Almighty! I am going the way of all flesh.” A friend replied, “The Lord is gracious.” Newton responded, “If it were not so, how could I dare to stand before him?” Newton’s indebtedness to the amazing grace of God in saving and preserving rebels flooded his consciousness from new birth till death. His Hymn has reminded generations of God’s pervasive grace for two and one-half centuries.

Learning the bare facts of a person’s biography can orient us to his life. Here are some for John Newton. John Newton was born in London, July 24, 1725. His mother died in 1832 and with her perished all instruction in Christian truth. His formal education began at a boarding school when he was eight and ended when he was ten years old. He sailed on a merchant ship with his father from 1836 through 1842. Eventually, Newton served as the master of a slave ship. After years of unrestrained blasphemy, wild and careless living, in which he “bore every mark of final impenitence and rejection”[1] a gracious work of God patiently and by degrees brought him to serious searching around 1748 and saving faith sometime the next year. Eventually, Newton served as a parish minister in the Church of England at Olney from 1764-1780. Along with William Cowper he authored *Olney Hymns*, published in 1779.

Newton moved from Olney to St. Mary Woolnoth in London in 1780. He was active as a supporter of William Wilberforce in the abolition of the slave trade in England. He maintained

his ministry at St. Mary Woolnoth until his death December 21, 1807.

John Newton never forgot the rescue from sin and devastation that God wrought on him. Early in his life he picked up and set down a form of legalistic, self-righteous religion. By 18, he had been convinced by a clever sceptic of the fantastic character of all religion and Newton “plunged into infidelity with all his spirit.”[2] The few years subsequent to this saw him careless in all eternal and temporal things. He was a deserter from a ship, whipped and scorned, tormented by a slave-holding woman, sick almost unto death, and in great dangers in storms at sea. Newton narrowly escaped death on several occasions. In retrospect, he viewed these escapes as special arrangements of divine providence to secure him for salvation and for ministry.

He reached a high position on a slave ship and was given responsibility to manage a long-boat in Sierra Leone in order to sail from place to place to purchase slaves. He had rejected his former infidelity by 1748 and had several times of serious thought about his need of forgiveness. Later as he addressed skepticism and infidelity among parishioners in London, Newton described his escapade with this intellectual difficulty in a letter to his parish, St. Mary Woolnoth, in London.

I know how to pity persons of this unhappy turn, for it was too long my own. It is not only a hazardous, but an uncomfortable state; for, notwithstanding their utmost address and endeavours, they cannot wholly avoid painful apprehensions, lest the Bible, which they wish to be false, should prove to be the truth. It was thus with me, and it must, in the nature of things, be thus with every infidel. To doubt or deny the truth of Christianity is too common; but to demonstrate that it is false, is an utter impossibility. I laboured in the attempt, but when I least expected it, I met with evidence that overpowered my resistance; and the Bible which I had despised removed my scepticism. He against whom I had hardened my self, was pleased to spare me; and I now live to tell you, that there is forgiveness with him. [3]

He made progress in abandoning some of the evil practices of former years but still lacked any consistent grasp of the nature of gospel faith and true holiness. Similar to a line in verse three of “Amazing Grace,” Newton stated, “I was no longer an infidel: I heartily renounced my former profaneness, and had taken up some right notions; was seriously disposed, and sincerely touched with a sense of the undeserved mercy I had received, in being brought safe through so many dangers.”[4] He seems to have come to genuine faith around 1749; he married February 1, 1750, to a girl he had loved since 1742 when she was 14 years of age. He became master of a ship and was gone for fourteen months, but used the time for reading, discipline, and solitary contemplation. In all he made three voyages to purchase slaves that had been collected by slave traders on shore.

Newton's reflections on his nine years in the business of buying and transporting slaves caused him deep shame. In writing "Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade," Newton stated, "I am bound in conscience to take shame to myself by a public confession, which, however sincere, comes too late to prevent or repair the misery and mischief to which I have, formerly, been accessory." [5] Having begun in 1745 on the coast of Guinea, mastering a ship by 1750, ready for a fourth voyage in 1754 on his ship, God visited him with a sudden illness and he resigned his ship to another captain. His nine-year involvement in the slave trade came to an end. He had found it disagreeable but did not consider it unlawful and wrong. At a distance of thirty-three years, Newton described the effects of the slave trade, the slave ships, the slave auctions, the life on plantations on captor and captive alike. The slave men endured—if they finally endured at all—difficulties designed for them; the women have to submit to outrages they have no power to resist, "abandoned, without restraint, to the lawless will of the first comer." [6] He gave himself to join forces with those who argued in Parliament to abolish the African slave trade. He knew of nothing "so iniquitous, so cruel, so oppressive, so destructive" as that. [7]

Through a series of clearly providentially arranged circumstances, Newton was able to find by 1757 a business that allowed him much time for study. He formerly had taught himself Latin, had read many of the Latin classics when on ships, and now determined that he would give himself to learn Greek. This was done to a degree that he could consult and use certain helps in the language in order to draw his personal conclusions as to the meaning of texts. He also read much of "the best writers in divinity" in English, Latin, and French. Soon he began to engage in writing and confined his reading mostly to the Scriptures. He summarized, "I have been obliged to strike out my own path by the light I could acquire from books; as I have not had a teacher or assistant since I was ten years of age." [8] Having had some opportunities to preach and engaged in an encouraging discussion with a seasoned minister, Newton wrote his wife, "I fear it must be wrong, after having so solemnly devoted myself to the Lord for his service, to wear away my time, and bury my talents in silence, ... after all the great things he has done for me." [9]

Newton grew in his deep conviction that God was preparing him for some work of gospel ministry. For a while he considered joining the Dissenters until his mind was relieved of some of his "scruples" concerning conformity. After receiving approval for parish ministry, several attempts for a parish failed until 1764 when the Bishop of Lincoln approved him and promised to ordain him. He carried through on this, though as Newton reported, "I was constrained to differ from his lordship on some points." [10] After being ordained deacon in April 1764, he was ordained as priest in June of 1765 and was appointed to the parish of Olney.

In 1768 he published "An Address to the Inhabitants of Olney." He began with a pledge of genuine concern for these people in the parish: "Every person in the parish has a place in my

heart and prayers, but I cannot speak to each of you singly.” After giving a summary of gospel truth, Newton addressed six groups of parishioners. One, he addressed those who had faith or were convinced of its necessity. He encouraged them to pursue true faith and not to allow distractions to interrupt their quest. Two, those who felt the gospel to be a burden and would not give it a patient hearing he challenged them to examine his preaching and consider the sure approach of death. On what would they lean in that hour? Could they prove his doctrine was out of accord with the New Testament or the doctrinal standards of the Church? Third, he addressed those who abstained from public worship and their profanation of the Sabbath. He feared that they might be given over to a reprobate mind. Others who found time for only one public service a week should not be surprised that God withholds his blessing from them even in that service. Fourth, he lamented how generally the word of God was ignored among the people of the parish. In particular he pointed to sexual sin of multiple varieties. Such person are especially susceptible to divine judgment for God “will not hold you guiltless in the day of his wrath.” He urged these parishioners to humble themselves, repent, and “flee to the refuge provided for helpless sinners in the gospel.”[11] Fifth, Newton addressed the spirit of open impiety and infidelity. He held up his own case as one in which a blasphemer, persecutor, and injurious man “to a degree I cannot express” obtained mercy. “The exceeding abundant grace of our Lord Jesus Christ brought me out of that dreadful state” He urged this sort of unbeliever to seek the Lord while he may be found; if not, do not increase wrath by making jest of the Scriptures, the gospel, and those who love them. Sixth, there was a considerable number that were not believers, but were not openly profane, were regular in their attendance, but probably rested in their outward privilege and thought their freedom from open abominations made them safe. To them he urged, “May the Lord awaken you to a diligent search into your own hearts, and into his holy word, and not suffer you to take up with any thing short of a real and saving change.”[12]

In both parish ministries, at Olney and in London, Newton experienced spiritual success and ministerial distress. At Olney, his influence on William Cowper induced in Cowper “the only sunshine he ever enjoyed, through the cloudy day of his afflicted life.”[13] Cowper’s intense state of mental and spiritual distress had led him to serious plans and attempts at suicide. A mental confrontation with Romans 3:25 and the reality of the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ led Cowper to an experiential appropriation of gospel comforts. He moved to Olney in 1767 for the purpose of receiving the preaching and pastoral care of Newton. Cowper devoted himself to consistent and helpful ministry among the parishioners at Olney. Newton and Cowper often discussed evangelical doctrine and spiritual life, sharing common passion for the rescue of their lives by divine grace including their collaboration on Olney Hymns. The publication of Olney Hymns by Newton was Cowper’s first literary appearance. Among these were “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood,” based on Zechariah 13:1, “Oh, For a Closer Walk With God,” based on Genesis 5:24, and “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” containing the line “Behind a frowning providence,

he hides a smiling face.” Subsequent to writing this hymn Cowper relapsed into a severe depression for almost a year. Newton gave him consistent pastoral care during this time.

J. M. Ross, the memoirist of Cowper in *Cowper’s Poetical Works* [14] nursed an intense dislike for Newton and his piety as well as his theology. He called him an “intensely evangelical and energetic divine.” He blamed him for Cowper’s relapse into severe depression by characterizing his influence as driving him to “pharisaic minuteness” prompted by religious feelings ... unusually gloomy and atrabiliar.”[15] He called Cowper’s happy labors beside Newton in ministry as “the unhealthy nature of the work in which he was now engaged.” Ross possessed the uncanny talent for passing around his insulting evaluations by saying of Cowper, “His thoughts were neither mystical nor profound; they were not even subtle or warmly poetical. Seldom indeed has so genuine a poet possessed so poor an imagination.”[16] Ross did recognize, however, the consistent and even powerful influence Cowper had on the middle classes of Englishmen. The religious received him as a notable ally. He did not “veil in doubtful haze the truths of Christianity,” but with him “all is as orthodox as a sermon.” Englishmen could understand him as “easily as they did their clergymen on Sundays.”[17] The clarity and resonant relevance of Cowper’s poetry was largely due to his years of hearing the sermons of Newton, even if later years and Cowper’s unstable mental condition and wide variety friendships and pastimes cooled their relationships.

Also, at the time that Cowper had lapsed into a period of deep mental and emotional instability, Newton began an extended correspondence with Thomas Scott, writing at least eight letters from June to December, 1775.[18] Scott, verging toward Socinianism and resistant to creedal subscription, looked on Newton as shackled by “enthusiastic delusions” and “rank fanaticism.” Newton dealt tenderly with him. Without insulting him or treating him condescendingly, he discussed both orthodoxy and Christian experience with friendly firmness. Giving only mild defense of the necessity of subscribing a creed and practicing a liturgy, Newton was firm on the specific doctrinal issues that he suspected were at the bottom of Scott’s challenges. “I am far from thinking the Socinians all hypocrites,” Newton assured him, “but I think they are all in a most dangerous error; nor do their principles exhibit to my view a whit more of the genuine fruits of Christianity than deism itself.” In the matter of God’s acceptance of sincerity in place of accurate understand or mental commitment, Newton responded, “It is not through defect of understanding, but a want of simplicity and humility, that so many stumble like the blind at noon-day, and see nothing of those great truths which are written in the Gospel as with a sun-beam.”[19] Newton wrote of total depravity, the necessity of regeneration and its insuperable power, the Trinity, justification and other doctrines as clearly taught in Scripture and verified in experience. “Since my mind has been enlightened, “Newton testified to Scott, “everything in me and everything around me, confirms and explains to me what I read in Scripture; and though I

have reason enough to distrust my own judgment every hour, yet I have no reason to question the great essentials, which the Lord himself hath taught me.”[20] Scott’s final reception of these truth and experience of this faith in Jesus was yet several years away. Eventually, however, he was brought to see the truth of Newton’s doctrine and experience and to become the “humble recipient of the kingdom of heaven as a little child.”[21]

Despite his consistent, loving, and biblically faithful labors at Olney, the group of faithful hearers which afforded him joy and support passed away but were not replaced by other persons of similar spiritual experience. Finally the unconverted so dominated the social life of the parish, that on one occasion Newton had to ransom his house from their intent to do violence on a particularly rowdy and riotous evening. Within a year he left Olney for a new appointment in London. Newton told Richard Cecil that “he should never have left the place while he lived, had not so incorrigible a spirit prevailed, in a parish which he had long laboured to reform.”[22]

The move to London did not eliminate the difficulties of an evangelical, experientially-alive Anglican priest in an Anglican parish. Criticism mounted during his first year of parish ministry there, and he felt that an explanatory letter concerning his doctrine and his preaching was necessary. On November 1, 1781, he published “A Token of Affection and Respect to the Parishioners of St. Mary Woolnoth.”[23] Part of the difficulty of a parish ministry in an ecclesiastical establishment is that confidence in the regenerate character of the congregation must be very low. The minister does not minister to a church. His is a task to herd goats and seek to justify his ministry and his message to those who are naturally and principally opposed to his purpose. The appeal Newton makes to the parish is admirable for its courage, its spirit of legitimate deference, and its undercurrent of evangelism, but as an implied comments on the condition of the parish, it is lamentable.

He admonishes those who are in the parish and have received the baptism of the established Church of England whom he never sees on the Lord’s Day. The auditory is numerous but Newton observed, “I see so few of my own parishioners among them.”[24] Many to whom the “word of salvation is sent, refuse to hear it.” Also, Newton observed the progress of “infidelity” among them, a general disregard for the Christian religion in particular. He reminded them clearly that the facts, provisions, and conditions of the gospel message were matters of divine revelation and they “cannot wholly avoid painful apprehensions, lest the Bible, which they wish to be false, should prove to be true.”[25] Many others perhaps believe in a formal sense that the Bible is true but give little energy to either knowing or obeying it. They are offended when “a faithful preacher forces upon your conscience” the consequences of careless regard to the dictates of the final judge and, therefore, find sufficient excuse for not hearing him again. Some still attend worship, but do it in other parishes to avoid the intensely Bible-centered preaching of

Newton. They should be careful that their contempt is not really against him, though they may delude themselves to think so, but is against “the doctrine of the prophets and apostles, and of Christ himself.”[26] Newton professed never to have purposely given offense, but also he knew “that if I would be faithful to my conscience, some of my hearers must be displeased.”[27] How to sort out the meaning of terms of opprobrium used against him, Newton was unsure; he was sure, however, that any term used, such as “Methodist,” even if void of any clear meaning would be “sufficient proof that it cannot be worth their while to hear me.”[28] Others complained that he preached too long at forty-five minutes when they were quite eager to use a much longer portion of their day to hear useless entertainment or political speech. “It is not so much the length,” Newton warned, “as the subject matter that wearies you.”[29] Other complained that he preached extempore and did not read his sermons. His complaint evoked the most extensive response from Newton. He explained the historical situation which led to reading sermons as a safety measure for the preacher and how that developed into a mark of scholarly preparedness. Newton objected to the impression and showed how extempore reasoning and admonition showed expertise and knowledge in a way that a manuscript did not. Scripture topics, moreover, are fit “to awaken the strongest emotions, and to draw forth the highest exertions of which the human mind is capable.”[30] Since his subject matter is of infinitely “more concern to his hearers” than any other subject upon which men can place their thoughts or employ their tongues, “shall a minister of the gospel ... be thought the only man who has chosen a subject incapable of justifying his earnestness.” Given that his office requires him to “unfold the wonders of redemption, or to enlarge on the solemn themes of judgment, heaven and hell” can it be conceived that he should not indulge “such thoughts and expressions upon the spot, as the most judicious part of his auditory need not disdain to hear?”[31] He urged them to consider with penetrating earnestness that eternity was at stake and that they could not be accepted by him in the great day of his appearing if they were not “born from above, delivered from the love and spirit of the world, and made partakers of the love and spirit of the Lord Jesus.”[32] He declared himself without guilt of their blood in that day. To those who believed the gospel, had not deserted their place under his preaching, and maintained a viable experiential fellowship with Christ in his saving work, he gave a serious call. They could assist him to stop the mouths of gainsayers with conduct consistent with gospel faith and spiritual virtue. Such consistent heavenly-mindedness would “constrain them to acknowledge, that the doctrines of grace, which I preach, when rightly understood and cordially embraced, are productive of peace, contentment, integrity, benevolence, and humility.” Many would look for their halting and miscarriages, but the Lord has “engaged to support, to guide, and to guard you, and at length to make you more than conquerors, and to bestow upon you a crown of everlasting life.”[33]

Very few days of his life subsequent to his appointment to Olney were free of his astonished

admiration of such a transaction of grace and eternal security. His letter to London parishioners stated, “No person in the congregation can be more averse from the doctrines which I now preach than I myself once was.”[34] In a letter to John Ryland, Jr., Newton pointed to the providence of God in the death of useful ministers and in the calling of the most unlikely persons to gospel ministry. Samuel Pearce was taken very early in life (33 years of age), “not half my age,” wrote Newton, “but undoubtedly he lived to finish what the Lord had appointed him to do. So shall you and I.” Newton considered himself old at 74 but expressed his confidence in divine purpose, “Old as I am, I shall not die before my set time.” He wanted to “improve the present” and be prepared for the future. “Indeed,” he wrote, “I see little in this world worth living for on its own account; though I think no one has less reason to be weary of life. But I am not my own, and desire to have no choice for myself. May we live to His praise and die in His peace.” Further meditation on these phenomena brought Newton to observe, “The usefulness of some is protracted, while others like Mr. Pearce, are taken away early. . . . He who has the fulness of the spirit will never want instruments to carry on his work. He can raise them up as it were from the very stones.”[35]

Newton regularly called to mind the testimony of Paul as an encouragement. After Paul’s description of the deep rebelliousness and injurious intent of his life, he said of himself that of sinners “I am the chief” (1 Timothy 1:15). For Newton, this meant that even chief sinners could be saved and would thereby magnify the grace of God. He frequently drew attention to Paul’s testimony for he knew that its broad parameters enveloped him in its embrace. In a hymn entitled “Encouragement” Newton wrote

*Of sinners the chief,
And viler than all,
The jailer or thief,
Manasseh or Saul;
Since they were forgiv’n,
Why should I despair,
While Christ is in Heav’n
And still answers prayer. [36]*

Not only was Paul’s salvation designed for the encouragement of others, but his vibrant apostolic ministry given him by grace stirred Newton with God’s sovereign and surprising intentions. Paul

received the grace of God for salvation and further to be an apostle, a preacher, and a teacher (2 Timothy 1:11). In fact, the glorious gospel of the blessed God was committed to his charge (1 Timothy 1:11). The grace to Newton imitated that to Paul even in that. In reflecting on his appointment to the parish of St. Mary Woolnoth in London, Newton wrote, “that one of the most ignorant, the most miserable, and the most abandoned of slaves, should be plucked from his forlorn state of exile on the coast of Africa, and at length be appointed minister of the parish of the first magistrate of the first city in the world—that he should be there, not only testify of such grace, but stand up as a singular instance and monument of it—that he should be enabled to record it in his history, preaching, and writings, to the world at large—is a fact I can contemplate with admiration, but never fully estimate.” [37]

In 1799 Newton wrote John Ryland, Jr. with further expressions of amazement at God’s choice and qualifying of unlikely instruments. “He can call the most unworthy persons, and bring them from the most unlikely places, to labour in his vineyard. Had it not been so, you would have never heard of me. From what a dung hill of sin and misery did he raise me to place me among the princes of his people! Consider what I was and where I was (in Africa) and you must acknowledge I am a singular instance of sovereignty and the riches of His mercy!”[38] When friends thought at eighty years of age that he had gone beyond the competence required to maintain a pulpit ministry encouraged him to step down, he replied, “What! Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?”[39]

Newton’s epitaph inscribed on a memorial tablet at St. Mary Woolnoth celebrated the truly surprising grace of God in his conversion as well as in his long and effective ministry.

JOHN NEWTON,
CLERK
ONCE AN INFIDEL AND LIBERTINE,
A SERVANT OF SLAVES IN AFRICA,
WAS,
BY THE RICH MERCY
OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR
JESUS CHRIST,
PRESERVED, RESTORED, PARDONED,
AND APPOINTED TO PREACH THE FAITH
HE HAD LONG LABOURED TO DESTROY.

NOTES:

[1] John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 6 vols (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985) 1:24. Hereinafter designated as *Works*.

[2] *Works*, 1:10

[3] *Works*, 6:569.

[4] *Works*, 1:32.

[5] *Works*, 6:522.

[6] *Works*, 6:535.

[7] *Works*, 6:548.

[8] *Works*, 1:50.

[9] *Works*, 1:54.

[10] *Works*, 1:55.

[11] *Works*, 6:559.

[12] *Works*, 6:562.

[13] *Works*, 1:61.

[14] William Cowper, *Cowper's Poetical Works*. Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, nd. Hereinafter designated as *Cowper's*. An introductory "Life of William Cowper" was written by J. M. Ross.

[15] *Cowper's*, v.

[16] *Cowper's*, xiv.

[17] *Cowper's*, xvi.

[18] These letters are contained in *Newton's Works*, 6:556-618. Thomas Scott gave an account of his skepticism and his rescue from it in *the Force of Truth*, London: Printed for G. Keith, 1779. Scott's "authentic narrative" was published the same year that *Olney Hymns* was published.

[19] *Works*, 1:568.

[20] *Works*, 1:570.

[21] *Works*, 1:68.

[22] *Works*, 1:69.

[23] *Works*, 6: 567-583.

- [24] Works, 6: 568.
- [25] Works, 6: 569.
- [26] Works, 6: 371.
- [27] Works, 6: 572.
- [28] Works, 6: 574.
- [29] Works, 6: 574, 575.
- [30] Works, 6: 577.
- [31] Works, 6: 578..
- [32] Works, 6: 580, 581.
- [33] Works, 6:583.
- [34] Works, 6: 582.
- [35] Grant Gordon, Ed. *Wise Counsel*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009) 369, 370.
- [36] Works, 3:581.
- [37] Works, 1:73. Quote included in the biographical introduction by Richard Cecil.
- [38] *Wise Counsel*, 370, 371.
- [39] Works, 1:88

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JIM CARNES

Why Do You Sing That God's Grace Is Amazing?

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,

That saved a wretch; like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

Reflect on past mercies and consider future hopes so that you can sing in the present.

This year is the 250th anniversary of the writing of the hymn Amazing Grace so a little reflection on the past might prove helpful. Knowing about the author of the text – John Newton – and what motivated him to pen those memorable words should also be an encouragement to us who still sing this great old hymn.

It would seem that Newton himself was reflecting on the biblical text, 1 Chronicles 17:16-17, on his own life and on some key doctrinal truths. Such reflection led him to put into poetic form words and phrases that summarized biblical truth leading to a response of heartfelt worship. Reflection on God's revelation should lead to doxology.

Amazing Grace was first published in Olney Hymns (1779), titled "Faith's review and expectation." Literary scholar Madeliene Forell Marshall described the overall message of the hymn in this way:

As usual, the original title, unavailable in our modern hymnals, provides useful direction to our reading: the hymn will look back in time, tracing the experience of faith (i.e., “review”), and forward, anticipating the future (i.e., “expectation”).[1]

Referring to Newton’s sermon notes we observe that he understood how this looking backwards and forwards assisted him in learning the rich doctrines that nourished his spirituality for the rest of his life. He was concerned about living a life of thankfulness and gratitude in response to God’s blessings:

The Lord bestows many blessings upon his people, but unless he likewise gives them a thankful heart, they lose much of the comfort they might have in them. And this is not only a blessing in itself but an earnest of more. When David was peacefully settled in the kingdom, he purposed to express his gratitude by building a place for the Ark. . . . My text is part of his acknowledgement. Omitting David’s personal concerns, I would accommodate them to our own use as a proper subject for our meditations on the entrance of a new year. They lead us to a consideration of past mercies and future hopes and intimate the frame of mind which becomes us when we contemplate what the Lord has done for us.[2]

According to these sermon notes, under points two and three, Newton asks the reader to reflect on the past and then consider the future. In the first of the two points Newton asks the reader to look back to past mercies, before conversion, at the point of conversion, and those mercies since then. In the first of the subpoints Newton pointed to God’s providential care in preserving us from all kinds of danger by His secret guidance. The second subpoint was a reminder about the moment where the merciful God enabled us to believe; and the third subpoint was reflection on the way mercy and goodness had followed us kept us through temporal and spiritual troubles.

The third point pointed called his congregation’s attention to future grace. “Are these small things? Yes, compared to what follows – He has spoken for a great while to come, even to Eternity. Present mercies are but earnest of his love, present comforts but foretastes of the joy to which we are hastening. O that crown, that kingdom, that eternal weight of glory! We are travelling home to God. We shall soon see Jesus, and never complain of sin, sorrow, temptation or desertion any more.”[3]

This was a common technique in his sermons. He would supply historical examples to help us to consider past mercies and point to the promises of God to get us to consider future hopes all for the purpose of helping us to approach present problems in a way that would honor God. That is what he does in this hymn. He wants us to reflect on past mercies and consider future hopes so that we can sing in the midst of present problems.

Contemplate how the power of hymns might more fully develop our perceptions of God.

It is one thing to state that doxology flows as a response to God's revelation and that the response is a reflection on the past works of God. It is another thing to understand how both a reflection on the past and a consideration of future grace of God helps us to respond in worship to the present works of God's providence. I would like to add a supplementary principle to this thesis. Contemplation about the power of hymns help to form our perceptions of doctrinal truths like the grace of God.[4] For example, not only does meditation on God's word about His grace inform and enlarge our conception of the nature of God, but, in addition, deep thinking and singing about hymns themselves help to strengthen our views of God's magnificent grace.

Have you not found yourself in deep admiration of God's grace and thankfulness for His mercy and grace when you sing some great hymn? Consider the hymn by Samuel Davies, Who is a pardoning God like Thee, and who has grace so rich and free? The Scriptures certainly teach from Micah that God is one who pardons our iniquities. We know that, but when we sing that truth and repeat it in the chorus of the hymn, the truth grows down deeper into our soul. And then, we rejoice with thankfulness and gratitude that God's grace indeed is rich and free! We remember the thousands of times that God has pardoned our sins and our soul melts at the thought that God has lavished His rich grace upon us. And when we sing it, not by ourself, but with other believers who understand that same truth and who sing about it with great joy in harmony with us, then our heart grows stronger and we exult in the grace of God.

Exposition of the First Stanza

Amazing grace!

Observe how Newton gets you to think with him about past mercies. Consider the first stanza of the hymn, phrase by phrase. Each phrase informs the singer about some essential biblical truth and how it has affected Newton. It tells us in the very first line that after long, deep reflection Newton has discovered and glories in the fact that the grace of God that has been shown to him throughout his life should always arrest the heart as something that is truly amazing! Grace is qualified! This sounds like Paul after meditating on grace in Ephesians 1 breaks forth in doxological wonder. We sing because of God's **amazing grace!**

This was in accord with Newton's confessional concept of grace as found in the 39 Articles of Religion that he ascribed to as an Anglican minister.[5] In section 17 about predestination and election the confession teaches that God's grace enables us to obey the gospel call, justifies us, and causes us to be adopted as a child of God; and all according to the everlasting, predestinating purpose of God.[6]

Newton's view of grace is based on Scripture and enriched by the language of the confession. It is amazing grace and he is going to explain why in the hymn! Newton's sermon notes reference an initial question: Who am I? His shorthand notes then mention:

The frame of mind: humility and admiration. Who am I, etc. This question should be always upon our minds. Who am I? What was I when the Lord began to manifest his purposes of love? This was often inculcated upon Israel, Thou shalt remember – Look unto the pit from which we were taken. Lord, what is man! [7]

His next subpoints are a reflection on his pre-conversion condition of misery, rebellion, and the need for mercy. When we consider our pre-conversion we discover that we were shut up under the law and unbelief. And therefore miserable. We were also blinded by the god of this world and rebellious. We didn't even have a desire of deliverance. Instead of desiring the Lord's help, we breathed a spirit of defiance against Him. His mercy came to us not only undeserved but undesired. And we didn't know that it was the Lord against whom we sinned and who showed us mercy. "What just cause of admiration, that he should appoint such salvation, in such a way, in favour of such helpless, worthless creatures." [8]

So then, consider how fully did Newton understand this doctrine of grace. Surely a reflection on the truth that prior to his conversion he was in a miserable situation, was a deliberate, intentional, rebellious sinner, was a sinner undesiring and underserving of any kind of mercy or grace — surely a reflection on these truths would be just cause for admiration of God's amazing grace!

A few years later, Newton referenced this amazing grace in a letter to John Thornton, 12 Sept. 1776:

... surely no one could be a greater libertine in principle or practice, more abandoned or more daring than I. But I obtained mercy. I hardly feel any stronger proof of remaining depravity than in my having so faint a sense of the Amazing Grace that snatched me from ruin, that pardoned such enormous sins, preserved my life when I stood upon the brink of eternity and could only be preserved by miracle, and changed a disposition which seemed so incurably obstinate and given up to horrid wickedness. [9]

How sweet the sound

With all of this in mind it is no surprise that Newton would have tried to think of poetic ways to exult in such grace. And, thankfully, the language of grace is descriptive and doxological. There is an aesthetic quality about it. It is all about the truth, goodness, and beauty of our LORD and His ways. Newton uses the language of the senses to elaborate on holy things. There is hunger for

the things of God and there is a taste of sweetness in the Word of God. But the Word of God is also something that is heard with the ear, and in a beautiful mix of literary devices, there is a sweetness even in the sound of the Gospel in a believer's ear. The eyes are not forgotten. I once was blind, but now I see. Touch is also implied and employed in the idea of his being lost, but found, reminiscent of the familiar story of the Shepherd carrying the lost sheep on his shoulders or the embrace of the prodigal son in the arms of the loving Father. You can feel the touch of His arms underneath your tired body and the loving arms of His care and love surrounding you with welcome. The language is almost sacramental.

Notice how Newton articulated his understanding of this grace. Consider how he describes grace as a "sound"? **How sweet the sound.** Was he not thinking about the word of grace that was proclaimed and, thus, heard? And why does he describe the "sound" as "sweet"? This is not the language of an unbeliever, but of a believer who understands that God has called him out of darkness into His marvelous light. To Newton the word of grace that he heard was understood and interpreted within the context of the doctrine of effectual calling, of irresistible grace. It is because Newton understood that God had called him in such a way that he describes this grace as sweet. How sweet the sound.[10]

That saved

But why was the sound of the message of grace so sweet to Newton? It is because he saw himself as one who had been delivered by the power of the gospel.[11] **Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved....** The language of deliverance or rescue was very prominent during Newton's life. As someone who had spent so much time on the seas he knew full well the impotence of anything seeking to overcome the dangerous, powerful waves of the ocean that would lift themselves up against the slave ships. But he had also learned of the omnipotence of the Maker of the heavens and the earth, and that God alone, the Creator, was the only one who could rescue him from the storms.

Newton's scripture reference in his sermon notes, 1 Chronicles 17:16–17, poses the question from King David, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" This is reflected in the hymn when the writer speaks of being a "wretch," "lost," and "blind," **yet delivered** "through many dangers, toils, and snares." **The agency of that deliverance? "Tis grace has brought me safe thus far."**[12]

It seems as if Newton understood well his salvation as a deliverance from sin and from the wrath of God. Once again, in his sermon notes, read:

We had not so much a desire of deliverance. Instead of desiring the Lord's help, we breathed a spirit of defiance against him. His mercy came to us not only undeserved but undesired. Yea few [of] us but resisted his calls, and when he knocked at the door of our hearts endeavoured to shut him out till he overcame us by the power of his grace. [13]

Newton often would preach of the atoning, saving grace of God that had propitiated the wrath of God. This was a favorite theme because he understood just how wicked a sinner he had been before God saved him.

a wretch like me!

Newton never ceased to be amazed by God's grace and told his friends, "My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior." [14] He knew the doctrine of the depravity of mankind. He had a fully articulated understanding of anthropology. He knew that he was a sinner through and through; and so he worked hard at putting into poetic form a view of his own sinfulness. This is reflected in the hymn when the writer speaks of being a 'wretch,' 'lost,' and 'blind'.

In a sermon on 1 Timothy 1:15, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—and I was the worst of them all!" Newton states

Innumerable cases might be published to the honor of the great Physician; none more memorable perhaps than my own. I was laboring under a multitude of grievous evils: fired with raging madness, possessed with many devils, and bent upon my own destruction!

But Jesus interposed—unsought and undesired. He opened my eyes, and pardoned my sins! He broke my fetters, and taught my once blasphemous lips—to praise His name. For the foulest of the foul—He dies! [15]

Newton often reflected on his past wretchedness: Once he described his moral condition in the words of 2 Peter 2:14, "Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin." Newton later wrote, "The troubles and miseries . . . were my own. I brought them upon myself, by forsaking [God's] good and pleasant paths and choosing the way of transgressors which I found very hard; they led to slavery, contempt, famine and despair." [16]

This is the same truth found in the 39 Articles that Newton adhered to as well as the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechism that Newton's mother had taught him as a child. In section 9 on original sin the 39 Articles state that depravity is the "fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam; whereby man

is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation.”[17]

One can see that this was an important truth for Newton. In his sermons he would express what he had learned through the Scripture, through the confessions, and through his own experience. He understood the depths of his depravity. He had felt it; he had seen it for years. Otherwise, why would he go to such lengths to detail the effects of sin upon his life? **Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.**[18]

I once was lost, but now am found;

He also described himself as one who was lost. He just piled up terms to make sure the fullness of his sin was adequately understood. To understand why he would use this language you should remember Newton's understanding of the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son were important for his poetic language in the hymn.

Once again, Newton's understanding was informed by the Scriptures and his confessional statements, not only about his sinfulness, but also about the unconditional, electing love of the Christ who saved him and who watched over him and would not let him swerve too far from His providential keeping. **I once was lost, but now am found.**

Newton was convinced of the doctrine of unconditional election:

If any people have contributed a mite to their own salvation, it was more than we could do. If any were obedient and faithful to the first calls and impressions of his Spirit, it was not our case. If any were prepared to receive him beforehand, we know that we were in a state of alienation from him. We needed sovereign, irresistible grace to save us, or we would be lost forever! If there are any who have a power of their own, we must confess ourselves poorer than they are.[19]

Newton had an understanding of the major Calvinistic doctrines and it is obvious that he loved this doctrine of irresistible grace. In an article printed in the Banner of Truth magazine, Dudley Reeves wrote:

The tide of the battle for Newton's soul slowly turned with the dawning of gospel light, though for another six years he did not understand or enjoy evangelical preaching or conversation. Finally, the irresistible grace of God (or, as Newton preferred to say, the invincible grace of God) won the day — the crisis of capturing the citadel of Newton's soul was over and the life-long process of mopping-up operations was begun.[20]

Was blind, but now I see.

Newton labored to explain the glories of this grace. He was a wretch, yes, but he was also spiritually blind. He was in need of the powerful operation of the Great Physician to open his eyes to see the beauty of the only One who could save him. In an exposition on Luke 24:45, Newton explains:

He opened their minds—so they could understand the Scriptures.” Luke 24:45. When God opens the eyes of our understanding, we begin to see everything around us to be just as the Scripture has described them. Then, and not until then, we perceive, that what we read in the Bible concerning the horrid evil of sin, the vileness of our fallen nature, the darkness and ignorance of those who know not God, our own emptiness, and the impossibility of finding relief and comfort from creatures—is exactly true.[21]

In another sermon Newton described what it was like after the Lord opened his eyes. Newton employs the language of Isaiah 6:1-5 as his own voice and then prays for the same vision.

I saw the Lord! “In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord! He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of His robe filled the Temple. Hovering around Him were mighty seraphim, each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with the remaining two they flew. In a great chorus they sang, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty! The whole earth is filled with His glory!’ The glorious singing shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire sanctuary was filled with smoke! Then I said, ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips, because my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!’”

Oh! for a glance of what Isaiah saw, and has described! Oh! that we, by the power of that faith, could behold the glory of the Lord filling this house; that we could realize the presence and the attitude of His attendant angels! [22]

According to the Dictionary of American Hymnology, “Amazing Grace” is John Newton’s spiritual autobiography in verse.[23] Newton himself testifies of this:

I would tell you how it is with me if I could; at the best, it would be an inconsistent account. I am what I would not, and would what I cannot. I rejoice and mourn; I stand fast and am thrown down in the same moment. I am both rich and poor; I can do nothing; yet, I can do all things. I live by a miracle. I am opposed beyond my strength, yet I am not overpowered. I gain when I lose, and I often am a loser by my gains. IN A WORD, I AM A SINNER! A vile one; but a sinner believing in the Name of Jesus. I am a silly sheep, but I have a gracious, watchful Shepherd; I am a dull scholar, but I

have a Master who can make the dullest learn. He still enables me, He still owns me. Oh, for a coal of heavenly fire to warm my heart, that I might praise Him as I ought! [24]

We have considered only the first stanza of this beloved hymn but we see how many precious biblical truths are embedded in it, how many doctrinal principles are inculcated in it, and how many pastoral instructions can be gleaned from it. It is no wonder that has become one of the most popular hymns of all time. May we take time to reflect, as Newton did, on these same biblical truths, meditate on these same doctrinal principles, and consider the many pastoral instructions. May we learn to sing, with the rest of God's chosen ones, just how amazing His grace has been and continues to be for wretched, lost, blind, rebellious sinners.

NOTES:

[1] Madeline Forell Marshall, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound," *Common Hymnsense* (1995), pp. 80-84.

[2] "Amazing grace: the sermon notes," The John Newton Project.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Thanks to Tom Nettles for suggesting this thought. "Ruminations about the power of hymns help to form our middle mental perceptions of doctrinal truths."

[5] Note: Newton was raised by a devout Congregationalist mother who taught John the Westminster Catechism and the hymns of Isaac Watts; so he heard and recited the rich doctrinal catechism of the Presbyterians. Cf. John Piper. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/john-newton-the-tough-roots-of-his-habitual-tenderness>

[6] 39 Articles of Religion, article 17.

[7] "Amazing grace: the sermon notes," The John Newton Project.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Letter to John Thornton, 12 Sept. 1776, Cambridge University, Thornton Papers, Add 7674/1/B19, transcribed by Marylynn Rouse for The John Newton Project. <http://www.johnnewton.org>

[10] Newton seemed to like this phrase as he wrote another hymn adding extensively to the meaning of the words. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds. This hymn is based on Song of Solomon 1:3. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds In a believer's ear! It soothes his sorrows, heals his wound, And drives away his fear. It makes the wounded spirit whole, And calms the troubled breast; 'Tis manna to the hungry soul, And to the weary rest. Olney Hymns.

[11] Romans 1:16, I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation....

[12] "Amazing grace: the sermon notes," The John Newton Project.

[13] Ibid.

[14] John Newton, *Wise Counsel: John Newton's Letters to John Ryland Jr.*, Ed. Grant Gordon (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 401.

[15] John Newton, *The Works of John Newton, Volume 6* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2015), 6: 203-204.

[16] John Pollock, *Amazing Grace: John Newton's Story* (San Francisco: Harper & row, 1981), 62-63.

[17] 39 Articles of Religion, section 9.

[18] For further detail on this truth see Morgan Cunningham. "A Wretch Like Me": John Newton and 'Amazing Grace' Whitworth University (2018). *History of Christianity II: TH 314. Paper 22.* <https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1021&context=th314h>

[19] John Newton's Letters. The doctrines of election and final perseverance. <https://www.gracegems.org/Newton/09.htm>

[20] <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2019/five-examples-of-amazing-grace-in-the-life-of-john-newton/>

[21] https://www.gracegems.org/Newton/john_newton_excerpts2.htm

[22] Ibid.

[23] Dictionary of American Hymnology, "Amazing Grace"

[24] <https://www.pristinegrace.org/article.php?id=51794&ctitle=A+Testimony&author=John+Newton>

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PAUL TAYLOR

The Grace of Fear

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

This second stanza of John Newton’s “Amazing Grace” provides Christians with a rich and subtle insight into the nature of God’s saving work in the lives of believers. The verses encourage us to consider God’s providence over both the universal, objective elements of conversion – the new birth, including conviction of sin, repentance, and faith – but also over the subjective, particular circumstances of that conversion: the events, conversations, and degrees of the conviction that all believers feel. All are under the sovereignty of God in working out His purpose to save His people.

What might surprise the reader upon closer examination of the hymn is the stanza’s first line: “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved.” What is interesting about this line is that it at least implies that the same grace which prompts fear answers that fear. But how can the grace of God prompt fear? The fear Newton mentions is spurred by recognition of the Law’s demands and the wrath of God imminent upon a sinner. The Scriptures reinforce this fear of God’s wrath. As far back as the Exodus, Moses observes, “Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of You?” (Psalm 90:11-12). In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews rhetorically declares, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). This fear from God’s righteous standards is succinctly articulated by Abraham Booth, the great English Particular Baptist:

“[W]hen the Spirit of God convinces of sin by the holy law, and manifests its extensive demands to the conscience of the sinner; when he is informed that every sin subjects the offender to a dreadful curse; then his fears are alarmed and his endeavours are quickened...for now, guilt burdens his soul, and conscience sharpens her sting; while the terrors of the Almighty seem to be set in array against him. The duties he has neglected, the mercies he has abused, and the daring acts of rebellion he has committed against his divine Sovereign, crowd in upon his mind and rack his very soul.”[i]

But again, how can fear be gracious? It is gracious in hindsight when considered as part of the process through which God redeems a Christian. It could be said that God prepares a person for salvation through an awareness of the guilt and judgment impending upon him as a sinner before God. The fear of God’s Law can precede the comfort of God’s Gospel as day follows night.

Newton’s own life and conversion provides a concrete example of just this kind of providential work. While a sailor at sea, living in “carnal security,”[ii] Newton was awoken by a violent storm that threatened to sink them, and though working frantically to exhaustion to save the ship, he despaired of any hope of deliverance:

“As he was returning, [Newton] said, almost without meaning, ‘If this will not do, the Lord have mercy upon us!’...[s]truck with his own words, it directly occurred to him, What mercy can there be for me!”[iii]

Ultimately, the ship and crew were spared, but it was through these circumstances that Newton came to reflect on the Scripture’s teaching of his need for Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit within him, and during this trial became a follower of Jesus. Yet, it should be clear, it was not ultimately physical death that concerned Newton – he was terrified that, were the Scriptures true, his soul would be lost, condemned before a holy God. It was precisely this experience of fear before the terror of God’s holy wrath that John Newton learned about the allaying power of the Gospel.

Nor is Newton’s life an anomaly in redemptive history. The book of Acts especially provides examples of fear preceding the comfort found only in Christ. There is the record of Pentecost. After hearing Peter’s preaching, the Jews were “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37) – that is, they were filled with anxiety and remorse over the realization that they had been responsible for crucifying the Lord’s Christ.[iv] In their desperation they cried out for some source of hope – “Brothers, what shall we do?” – recognizing that they had no apparent hope for redemption against the God they had offended. Yet they received the words of Peter to repent of their sins and became devoted to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship (2:42). Another example can be found in the Philippian jailer. He too, upon learning of Paul and Silas’ presence in the cell, became filled with

fear and trembling, and not merely due to his concern for his life, but clearly through the witness of their praying and singing hymns (Acts 16:25).

The idea that God prepares sinners for conversion prior to regeneration has roots in Protestant history. Particularly during the Puritan era, as Scriptural truths were being rediscovered and developed, it was a topic of discussion how much of God's illumination merely convicted of sin and how much actually saved a person.[v] They astutely observed that Law works in the hearts of men so as to deprive them of any sense of hope to stand before God in their own righteousness and power, and it is through that helplessness that the sweetness of the Gospel message is tasted. For example, in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, we see in the early pages that the pilgrim Christian is tormented by the burden of his sin lashed to his back. He is aware of his guilt, and desires to be free of its ponderous weight. Yet it will be some time in the narrative before Christian is free of his burden. In fact, it will not be removed until he enters the Wicket Gate and the place of deliverance beyond. Consequently, the reader may infer that, though we cannot know for certain how long it is, there is sometimes distance between a believer's awareness of his burden (the fear of God's Law) and that burden's removal (the power of the Gospel to save).

Yet this fearful sensitivity, called conviction of sin, cannot be identical with regeneration. It is not clear merely from conviction whether the Spirit's work is completed, or whether this constitutes earthly fears of heavenly realities now considered. John Owen, reflecting on the work of the Spirit in regeneration, observes, "ordinarily there are certain previous and preparatory works, or workings in and upon the souls of men, that are antecedent and dispositive unto it. But yet regeneration doth not consist in them, nor can it be educed out of them." [vi] Newton himself concurs, "We may be unable to judge with certainty upon the first appearance of a religious profession, whether the work be thus deep and spiritual or not; but 'the Lord knows them that are his.'" [vii] Though the outside fear may not be infallible as to its origin, it is nevertheless true that such fears can be and often are expressive of a heart in the process of being converted. This makes the nature of when regeneration takes place imprecise. The divine aspect of regeneration, the work of God, is internal; we only see external aspects – conviction of sin, repentance, faith in Christ. The new birth, in Jonathan Edwards' words, may come in "a confused chaos...exceeding mysterious and unsearchable." [viii] B. H. Carroll further articulates this imprecision:

"[c]onviction, repentance, and faith are the constituent elements of regeneration; that is, they are the elements within our range of vision. We can see only the under side of what is above us. When we describe it, we describe it as we see it. As the view is partial, the description is partial." [ix]

Occasionally, some Puritans steered into language and concepts of God's convicting work prior to conversion that were unhelpful and imbalanced. A particularly famous example is the New

England Puritan Thomas Hooker. In some of his works he asserted that an acute sense of fear from God's Law is a necessary qualification to repentance and faith: "[the pre-regenerate person] must be a lost man in his own apprehension...All men must thus be disposed before they can be saved." [x] However, many contemporaries challenged Hooker's suggestion that godly terror must first precede regeneration. From the earlier quote from Owen, we can see how he qualifies his observations with the word "ordinarily." Preparatory works resulting in fear can certainly be present, but that is not a necessary precondition for the Spirit to work. Notably, the early Particular Baptist William Kiffen found Hooker's thoughts distasteful, and his thoughts are reflected in Article 25 of the First London Baptist Confession of 1644 (1646 revision): "The preaching of the gospel to the conversion of sinners, is absolutely free; no way requiring as absolutely necessary, any qualifications, preparations, or terrors of the law, or preceding ministry of the law." [xi]

More recent Christian theologians, especially after the First Great Awakening, have concurred with this hesitancy toward a unilateral experience prior to salvation. The thoughts of Archibald Alexander, living in the generation subsequent to the labors of Edwards, Whitefield, Rowland, and Wesley, summarize this consensus. After observing the idea of legal conviction (being convicted of the law's curse) had "generally prevailed in all our modern revivals: and it is usually taken for granted, that the convictions experienced are prior to regeneration," he then states, "But it would be very difficult to prove from Scripture, or from the nature of the case, that such a preparatory work was necessary." [xii] In the present day Sinclair Ferguson observes, "Because God sees what he intends to produce in us and through is as his children, he exposes us to differing levels of conviction. Some like Peter's sermon on Pentecost, are under conviction for minutes; others, like Paul, perhaps for days; yet others go through a dark night of the soul which seems interminable, like Bunyan and Luther before him." [xiii]

These historical-theological accounts invite the question: if conviction of sin is a part of salvation – one sign of regeneration – why is it not essential prior to salvation? Further, how can some experience the conviction of sin and its attendant fear more acutely than others? Why do some not experience the degree of fear Newton summarizes so well in "Amazing Grace"? The answer to this lies in understanding what might be called universal and particular aspects of salvation. Every Christian is saved in accordance with God's eternal electing plan, the universal character of this saving work between the God who redeems and the person who is redeemed. All sinners are hopeless in themselves to be saved. All three Persons of the Godhead participate in a person's being brought from death to life; the work of the incarnate Son, accomplished in His earthly ministry, is implemented by the Holy Spirit who regenerates the believer at the behest of the Father's effectual call. Every Christian is incorporated into the one people of God (Eph. 4:4-6).

In sum, the work of redemption has a linear process, from the effective call to glorification, with regeneration, repentance/faith, justification, and sanctification falling between these (Rom. 8:30).

Nevertheless, this work of redemption, universal in character, takes place during a person's life and experience, the particular aspect. Were it God's will, He could simply redeem a person immediately with the fullness of Christ's purchased salvation. This is certainly within the power of Him who called all things into being by the utterance of His Word (2 Cor. 4:6). Yet God has rarely chosen such an expeditious manner in saving sinners. Very often, in fact almost always, He works in a believer's life through the events, circumstances, and processes unique to his life. Archibald Alexander, in his insightful *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, places these differences in experience within the situational, historical, and constitutional differences between each individual person, requiring pastoral wisdom in assessing a person's spiritual state.[xiv] There is manifold wisdom in God's way of saving sinners. Each person participates in the one salvation wrought by Christ, yet each person also contributes a distinct story of how that saving grace is manifested in him. John Murray observes, "If God has provided for the salvation of men, it must be salvation that takes effect in the sphere of human existence, that is, in the temporal, historical realm. Salvation as accomplished in time comprises a great many elements, factors, and aspects."[xv]

The universal and particular aspects of redemption lead us to conclude that, though there is one salvation for all, the experience of one Christian in that process may drastically differ from another's. All these circumstances, though unique, are not outside of God's purview, but are the very means through which the Gospel, like leaven, works in the sinner's heart to convict him of sin and bring him to faith and repentance. Whether the night of conviction is long or short, God's grace brings a recollection of how He worked providentially in each of us to save us, drawing Christians into deeper devotion to Him for His grace, and a greater sense of our dependence on Christ for our unimpeachable hope.

"How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed."

NOTES:

[i] Abraham Booth, *The Reign of Grace: From Its Rise to Its Consummation* (reprint, Sprinkle Publications, 2017), 100. A similar insight into the uncertainty of when redemption is genuinely effected can be found in John Bunyan's autobiographical *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. This short piece can be found in *The Whole Works of John Bunyan* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 1:6-65. The Banner of Truth Trust has a standalone version of this title.

[ii] *The Works of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 1:25.

[iii] Ibid, 1:26, italics original.

[iv] The verb used here, μ (“to be pierced, stabbed”), can mean pain in reference to anxiety or remorse. See Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000), 523.

[v] For a helpful discussion of the topic of “preparation,” see Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 443-461, especially 455-461.

[vi] John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (Banner of Truth, 1981), 3:229.

[vii] Newton, *Letters of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 15, emphasis added.

[viii] Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, quoted in Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 459.

[ix] B. H. Carroll, “The Human Side of Regeneration,” in J. B. Cranfill, *Sermons and Life Sketch of B. H. Carroll*, D. D. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1893), 177.

[x] Thomas Hooker, *The Soul’s Preparation for Christ*, 170-171, quoted in James M. Renihan, *For the Vindication of the Truth: A Brief Exposition of the First London Baptist Confession of Faith* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2021), 99, emphasis added.

[xi] Quoted from Renihan, *Vindication*, 98. For evidence that Kiffen’s views are harmonious with the 1st London Confession, see *ibid*, 98-102.

[xii] Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (reprint, Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 15-16.

[xiii] Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2017), 42. Roland Bainton provides a useful summary of Luther’s “Damascus Road” experience in *Here I Stand* (New York: Mentor Books, 1950), 15. It is interesting to compare Luther’s earlier experience and subsequent vow with his later wrestling over salvation seen in the same biography at 46-51.

[xiv] Alexander, *Religious Experience*, 32-36.

[xv] John Murray, *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:123. Though Murray is specifying the diverse aspects of the plan of salvation from election to glorification, it is just as applicable to the personalized experience of salvation in the believer.

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TOM NETTLES

God's Sustaining Grace

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

“Amazing Grace,” or “Faith’s Review and Expectation,” appeared in “Olney Hymns” in 1779, six years after it was first sung in the parish church at Olney. It was number 41 in Book One, devoted to “select passages of Scripture” the lone entry under 1 Chronicles. Newton viewed the prayer of David in that text, 1 Chronicles 17:16 and following, as a review of the operations of divine grace in his experience. David looked to the past, to the present, and then to the future. When the Christian contemplates the grace of God, he sees it in its seamless power, recognizing its effectual workings of the past, observing its sustaining power in the present, and confident of its immutable purpose in the future.

The text of “Amazing Grace” contains the word grace six times. Notably, verse two has the most direct exposition of the operation and effects of converting grace—grace to fear and grace for fears relieved. This is “grace upon grace” (John 1:16). John explains that the first grace was in this, “The law was given through Moses.” The grace that was layered on top of that was found in this: “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The powerful grace of the Spirit in using the law to teach the fear of God and the consequences of sin led inexorably to the grace of faith in the completed work of Christ. Led to biblical belief by the Spirit of God showing the glory of Christ, the believer finds such grace as precious when the assaulted conscience under the terrors of God’s curse on lawbreakers find release by the certainty of acceptance. Verse two

captures it:

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

Verse three continues with the emphasis on sustaining grace, the necessary concomitant to saving grace. All of it is of the same quality and necessary, not only for the power and effectuality of regeneration, but for sustaining faith in a world hostile to the gospel and those who believe it.

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

Verse four, five, and six look to the future of God's sustaining grace in the believer's life: "As long as life endures. . . when mortal life shall cease, . . . will be forever mine." Though the final three stanzas do not contain the word grace, the preciousness of the promises communicated find their origin and certain sustenance in sovereign omnipotent grace.

Newton did not view grace as a cooperative power of God, but a unilateral and effectual exertion of power based on the eternal saving intent of God. In the preface to *Olney Hymns*, Newton made clear that he did not intend the hymn book to be an element of a polemical dispute with those who "differ with me, more or less, in those points which are called Calvinistic." [Newton, 3:303] He was not out to promote controversy, but to edify the worshipper and convict the unregenerate of sin and absolute dependence on God. He claimed the freedom, however, as others of a different viewpoint claimed for themselves, to make his hymns as clear as he could on points of doctrine and Christian experience that glorified God and sent the sinner to the merits of Christ and the grace of God without reservation. "The views I have received of the doctrines of grace," Newton explained, "are essential to my peace; I could not live comfortably a day, or an hour, without them." As to any accusation that they promote carelessness and diminish evangelistic concern, Newton contended for an opposite viewpoint. "I likewise believe, yea, so far as my poor attainments warrant me to speak," Newton averred, "I know them to be friendly to holiness, and to have a direct influence in producing and maintaining a Gospel conversation; and therefore I must not be ashamed of them." {Newton, Works 3:303]

In a sermon entitled, “Sovereignty of Divine Grace Asserted and Illustrated,” Newton began his final paragraph with the encouragement, “Does it not appear from hence, that the doctrine of free sovereign grace is rather an encouragement to awakened and broken-hearted sinners than otherwise?” [Newton Works, 2:413, 414] Newton consistently encouraged his auditory to find in Christ not only a sovereign Savior, but a merciful and willing Savior. In 1800, preaching before the “Lord Maor, Aldermen, and Sherifs,” Newton closed a message on “The Constraining Influence of the Love of Christ” with an earnest appeal to flee from “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord,” for “We have incurred the penalty annexed to the breach of this law.” [Newton 6:516]

To those who are sensible of their desert and danger, the gospel points out relief and a refuge. Jesus invites the weary and burdened sinner, and says, “Him that cometh, I will in no wise cast out. You have heard something of his glorious person, power, authority, and love. He is able, he is willing, he has promised to save to the uttermost all that come to God by him. Oh, that today you may hear his voice, and comply with his invitation! [Newton 5:516.]

When Newton, therefore, wrote of grace, he had in mind the sovereignly chosen, eternal disposition, of love toward sinners viewed as fallen and under just condemnation. From the unit of fallen sons of Adam, the triune God placed electing, redeeming, justifying, persevering love on particular individuals to bring them from being under a sentence of eternal damnation to inherit the status of sons of God and receive eternal life. In a hymn on Leviticus 8, Newton versed, “He bears the names of all his saints deep on his heart engrav’d; attentive to the states and wants of all his love has saved.” [Newton, 3:328] At the same time, that the gospel call is to be sent to all, Newton gave no pause. He wrote, “But Jesus invitation sends, treating with rebels as his friends; And holds the promise forth in view, to all who for his mercy sue.” [3:330] He used Samson’s lion to teach God’s protective grace for believers: “The lions roar but cannot kill; then fear them not my friends, they bring us, though against their will, the honey Jesus sends” [Newton, 3:333]. Contemplation on 2 Kings 2 in the story of Elisha’s healing the waters of Jericho with salt led to this verse. He emphasizes human depravity which can only be healed by grace.

*But grace, like the salt in the cruse,
When cast in the spring of the soul;
A wonderful change will produce,
Diffusing new life through the whole:
The wilderness blooms like a rose,
The heart which was vile and abhors,*

Now fruitful and beautiful grows,

The garden and joy of the Lord.

[Newton, 3:349]

The present experience of grace forms the substance of verse three. Newton viewed that experience in two parts—the dangers, toils and snares, of struggle involved in present sanctification, and second, the settled assurance that grace will lead us home. That idea is an element of and leads into the internal dominant hope (1 John 3:3) energized by the “Blessed Hope” (Titus 2:13) we find in verse 4—“His word my hope secures; He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.”

Newton described the “fears-relieved” kind of grace (verse 2) in a sermon entitled “Grace in the Blade” on Mark 4:28. Though punctuated with various manifestations of immaturity, lack of knowledge, fright, and terror before enemies, this is a time “remarkable for the warmth and liveliness of the affections.” [Newton 1:202] This new and enthusiastic believer Newton has named “A.”

The next stage, “B,” is “Grace in the Ear.” (Mark 4:28). Whereas desire and perhaps rapidly fluctuating joy and despair characterize “A,” Newton saw conflict as the state of “B” leading to a maturing understanding of the nature of the conflict caused by the operation of the flesh against the Spirit. “Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come.” The person denominated “B” knows that grace has brought him safe thus far.

Having felt the wrath of God pacified by the blood of Christ, having achieved some spiritual equilibrium, and having seen the deadly enemies of the past held at bay, B may think that little conflict will occur in his future pilgrimage. He learns otherwise very soon. “Alas!” Newton says. “His difficulties are in a manner just beginning; he has a wilderness before him, of which he is not aware.” God’s operations of grace will include some severe tests to “humble and prove him, and to shew him what is in his heart.” Aiming toward the “latter end” of life with more sustained comfort and anticipatory joy, this stage is designed by God “that all the glory may redound to his own free grace.” [Newton 1:205]

B learns that he lives “in a world that is full of snares, and occasions, suited to draw forth those corruptions.” [206] He is willing to endure hardship and knows from Scripture that his heart is deceitful and desperately wicked, but he could never anticipate how deeply he could fall if left to his own devices and strength. When he finds respite from breakthroughs of perversity and malicious sin, God gives occasions in which he still will discover “new and mortifying

proofs of an evil nature.” Hezekiah and Peter had exalted manifestations of grace followed by events in which, left to their own strength and determination, they fell to a sensible and distressing experience of their own evil nature when unsustained by immediate grace. A variety of experiences will teach B to be more “distrustful of his own heart” and view the way before him with ever-increasing conscious dependence on grace and “to suspect a snare in every step he takes.” [209]

As Newton described his own pilgrimage as person B, he found “multiplied instances of stupidity, ingratitude, impatience, and rebellion, to which my conscience has been witness!” [208] The person in this stage of pilgrimage in grace has a mind is more thoroughly informed by Scripture truth concerning the call to “lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily besets us” (Hebrews 12:1). Parallel to that, and with a maturing grasp of the coordinate operations of the “renewing of the mind” (Romans 12:2) and the “renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5), he has an increased awareness and admiration of “the rich sovereign abounding mercy of the covenant.” [209] “Through many dangers toils and snares I have already come. ‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far.”

When the result of grace is the “Full corn in the ear,” the Christian pilgrim can say, “and grace will lead me home.” Newton labeled this stage of pilgrimage as the experience of “C.” He more fully develops this in verse 4, but the threshold to that stage is introduced here. C recognizes more profoundly that whether living or dead, he belongs to Christ. He knows that even if he lives as long as Methuselah, and does not enter heaven for centuries, this will mean fruitful labor for him. It will involve opportunities for glorying in Christ before a wicked and perverse age. Like Paul, he desires to be with Christ, knowing that such a state is far better, but he has learned to be content in any condition in this life and to trust God’s wisdom as to the time and condition of his entry to the heavenly presence of Christ among the “spirits of just men made perfect” (Hebrews 12:23), for he knows that, by invincible grace, his place there is assured. “Grace will lead me home,” and that same grace will sustain me while I am here.

Newton described this state of grace as characterized by humility, spirituality, and “a union of heart to the glory and will of God.” [214, 215] He learns humility in looking back “upon the way by which the Lord has led him; and while he reviews the Ebenezers he has set up all along the road, he sees, in almost an equal number, the monuments of his own perverse returns.” [212] He learns a deeper and more humble submission to the will of God in all circumstances. While he is impatient with his own failures in light of God’s immeasurable grace, he learns to bear with others as they also will stumble over the “snares of the world.” [213].

C learns more intensely how deeply rooted is the evil principle that clings to him in this life and

thus learns to seek and value more profoundly the operations of the Spirit in mortification of the flesh. He learns how vain it is to cling to temporal things and how excellent it is to increase in the knowledge of God and conformity to Christ. As he looks with confidence to the grace that will lead him home, “He sees that the time is short, lives upon the foretastes of glory, and therefore accounts not his life, or any inferior concernment dear, so that he may finish his course with joy.” [214]

For C, grace still reminds him of the sinful pit from which he was lifted, and reminds him of the snares, dangers, and toils that once were more prominent and threatening than now. He still knows and feels the power of indwelling sin and yearns to be free of its hindrances. Increasingly diminished, however, is the fixture on oneself, and ever more prominent is a joy in savoring and contemplating the glories and beauties of God. “That God in Christ is glorious over all, and blessed for ever, is the very joy of his soul.” [216] They may have great grace for great difficulty and appear to make slow progress in their grasp of the glory of God. They may also have less intense outlays of grace for small difficulties and seem to advance rapidly. In both cases grace makes them endure.

Grace must sustain us from first to last. Preceded by the grace of election, Christ’s condescension, and victorious resurrection, we are dependent on divine grace even prior to any experience of it in our hearts. Made by grace to fear the curse and brought by grace to embrace the cure, we find grace upon grace. Born spiritually by the Spirit’s grace and secured eternally by the Redeemer’s intercession, grace will lead us home. The absolute and perpetual need of grace arises from the depravity of our hearts. We are humbled by this but not thrown down for an unending fountain of grace flows from the saving wounds of Christ “since Jesus is appointed to me of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption; and since I find that, in the midst of all this darkness and deadness, he keeps alive the principle of grace which he has implanted in my heart.” [Newton 1:250, “On a believer’s Frames.”]

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ERIK L. SMITH

The Amazing Grace of God's Providence

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

When John Newton penned his classic hymn in 1772, first sung in January 1773, the autobiographical reflections of his life to that point were clearly at the forefront of his mind. He had experienced more misadventures in his first few decades than most men, and the grace of the Lord had marvelously saved him from spiritual death as well as severe earthly danger.

In his fourth stanza Newton shifts his focus to the future, and he declares that the goodness of God which had thus far followed him through 46 years was his certain expectation for the remainder of his days. Indeed, believers should commemorate God's previous acts of kindness and deliverance, and Newton reminds us we should also entrust ourselves to the goodness of God for all our future days. Christians should expect God's perpetual goodness towards us. We should hold a posture of what one might call "Christian optimism," rooted in the character and the sure promise of God.

The Truth of God's Promise

God has promised good to his children. The reality of this statement is enough to make one marvel forever. The supreme Lord over all, who created the heavens and earth and is Himself majestic beyond comprehension, has condescended not merely to notice man, but to care for man and to devote himself to the good of man (Psalm 8). In God's act of creation, he makes for man a good world full of blessing and wonder. When he calls Abraham, he states that his purpose is for Abraham to be blessed and to be a blessing to humanity (Genesis 12:2). Indeed, throughout redemptive history we see God dealing with his people with the design of goodness and blessing in view (Exodus 19:6, 34:10; Deuteronomy 26:18-19; 2 Samuel 7; Jeremiah 29:10-14, 31:31-34). Paul declares to us who believe in Christ that God is actively at work in our lives to bring about our good and his glory (Romans 8:28-39). We shall say more about the substance of the good that God has promised, but may we first believe this promise, embrace it, and wonder at it.

There is a danger for us who want to resist popular and pervasive caricatures of God found in modern Christian teaching, music, and subculture, which emphasize the goodness of God and his "friendliness" to the neglect of presenting his holiness, sovereignty, and righteousness. That danger is that in our efforts to champion these latter traits we can become myopic and fail to cherish and celebrate the kindness and genuine goodness of God and his delight in his people, "For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation," (Psalm 149:9; cf. Zephaniah 3:17).

Instead, we must not lose sight of the consistent theme of scripture that God intends to bless his people and do good to them. True, God is not a cosmic Santa Claus, but neither is he a cold and indifferent potentate; he loves his children. Calling upon God as our Father is an act of faith in his benevolent disposition toward us. Hence, Jesus compares our love for our children with that of the Father for us: "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him," (Matthew 7:9-11). Christians ought to be the most hopeful, the most optimistic people because we know that the God who superintends the universe has a loving heart. Furthermore, the goodness of God is not a generalized intention but a personal promise; each believer can rightly say, "The Lord has promised good to me." Believing that God is good and intends to do good to us is a matter of believing his Word.

The Surety of God's Promise

As Newton asserts, our hope in God's promise is a certainty because it is grounded in his Word and his character. The author of Hebrews makes this same connection in reference to Abraham's hope and our own as heirs of the promise:

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus as gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. [1]

Our hope is for that which is certain and yet presently unseen, namely God's future goodness towards us in this life and ultimately in the final resurrection (Romans 8:20-25; 1 Corinthians 15:19). The Word of God is the basis for our hope; we believe the promises God has communicated to us. God's Word is also the means by which this hope is secured or brought to pass in our lives and in human history. When the Lord speaks, he is acting; unlike the mere words of a man, God's Word accomplishes purposes and has tangible effects on his creation. God's Word secures our hope because it is his Word that produces saving faith and repentance, and his Word is the very power of God to direct the course of human events (Romans 10:17; James 1:21; Isaiah 55:10-11; 1 Corinthians 1:18). Though Peter was an eyewitness of Christ's glory, he asserts that the prophetic word of the Scriptures was more certain than his own firsthand experience (2 Peter 1:16-20). Hence, when we do not see firsthand that God is being good to us, we can nevertheless believe it.

The Substance of God's Promise

God has promised good to us, but what is meant by "good?" Is it the "good" that is peddled by prosperity gospel hucksters, Word of Faith teachers, and even misguided evangelicals – namely physical health, material prosperity, and an abundance of self-esteem and self-affirmation? Does God's word promise a life of comfort and ease to believers? Or is there a higher good which we should expect from God, one that transcends our own experience, emotions, and even existence? Newton answers this by directing our attention heavenward and insisting that essence of God's promise for good is the promise that God would give himself to us – "He will my shield and portion be."

Scripture declares that God himself is both the source and the substance of our good. As John Piper helpfully summarizes, "The best and final gift of the gospel is that we gain Christ... the highest, best, final, decisive good of the gospel, without which no other gifts would be good, is the glory of God in the face of Christ revealed for our everlasting enjoyment." [2] So, what is this good that God has promised to us? It is nothing less than God himself. God calls, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies us for our good because these are the means by which we will know him, the ultimate treasure.

The world and the enemies of the gospel define “good” based upon human sensory experience: an attractive spouse, an expensive car, an adventurous vacation, a clean bill of health, successful children, worry-free existence, political power, and the list goes on. The good which God will bring about in our lives certainly permeates our human experience and is delightful to us, but it is not centered on us; it is anchored in and defined by him. This is the sense in which God is our portion. The reward of believing the gospel is that we gain Christ, and there is no possible higher reward.

We ought not expect the world to understand that supreme gladness is found only in knowing the Lord, and yet do we believers not also sometimes seek to find our chief happiness in those things which cannot ultimately satisfy us? Even good and commendable things can usurp God’s rightful place on the thrones of our hearts, individually and corporately. In Jeremiah 2:13 the Lord upbraids his people for such an exchange:

For my people have committed two evils:

They have forsaken me,

The fountain of living waters,

And hewed out cisterns for themselves,

Broken cisterns that can hold no water.

The Lord declared himself to be the shield of Abraham (Gen 15:1), Israel (Deuteronomy 33:29), and David (Psalm 3:3; 5:12, 18:2), depicting himself as the one who protected them from trouble and calamity. Each of us could undoubtedly recount myriad ways in which the Lord had delivered us from hardships, and yet the Lord has most certainly protected us from unknown and unexperienced trials about which we know nothing simply because he spared us and shielded us from them. We can be sure that God will not permit anything to penetrate his shielding except that which he designs to afflict us for our good. This is why in the face of profound loss and unfathomable suffering, those who know God can say that such afflictions are themselves good (Job 1:20-22; Philippians 3:7-11).

The Duration of God’s Promise

If the Lord were to promise us good only in this lifetime, we should be thankful for his mercy even in that short span of time. Yet God’s promise extends through the end of our days on earth and beyond, “as long as life endures.” As Jesus declared to Martha, so he promises to us, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26). To believe

this promise is to echo the praise of David, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever,” (Psalm 23:6).

The comfort that is ours in knowing the promise of God to do good to us, for us, and in us is a cause for great rejoicing when we see and experience this in our times of blessing. The birth of a child, a plentiful harvest, and seasons of spiritual growth and refreshment are tangible proofs of God’s promises and his faithfulness. But it is in the valley of the shadow of death, the periods of drought and famine, and the times of spiritual despondency when we most need to be reminded of God’s promises of goodness that will ultimately prevail over the trials we experience. When our temporal vista gives way to the perspective of eternity, we shall see that all along the Lord was doing everything for our good, just as he promised. As Newton’s friend William Cowper[3] penned,

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.
His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour:
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower. [4]*

In his summary of Newton’s life and theology, biographer Josiah Bull places a special emphasis on Newton’s optimism towards God’s providence, “But here we would especially speak of Mr Newton’s faith in the overruling providence of God. In all circumstances his soul stayed itself upon the Lord. Thus in the perils of the deep he possessed his soul in peace.”[5]

Newton saw that even the sufferings of life are part of God’s plan to bring about good, both in his own life and in the lives of others. In his deepest sorrow following the death of his wife, he remarked in his journal, “I acknowledge that it was well worth standing awhile in the fire for such an opportunity of experiencing and exhibiting the power and faithfulness of His promises.”[6]

Newton looked externally to God for his support, and he was sustained through his trial by considering that others who saw both his afflictions and his steadfast trust would have reason to look to God and be comforted when their own trials came. Newton preached the funeral service for his wife, and he remarked in his journal that he expected this to bear fruit, stating, “I have reason to hope that many of my hearers were comforted and animated under their afflictions by what they saw of the Lord’s goodness to me in my time of need.” Thus, our trust in God amidst the darkness may be used to be a blessing to others if we will but have eyes to see beyond ourselves in our travails. The good purposes God has for him who is suffering extend beyond the sufferer himself (Philippians 1:14, Colossians 1:24-25).

The Christian is not called to be a Pollyanna, willfully oblivious of the troubles that beset us and blindly optimistic about happiness lying just around the corner. Neither should Christians be like Eeyore, the old perpetually pessimistic donkey, incapable of finding contentment due to an expectation of inevitable hardship. Instead, we ought to trust the promise of God, that he intends good for us and that “He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it,” (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

NOTES:

[1]Hebrews 6:17-20

[2]John Piper, *God is the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 13.

[3]For a concise account of their friendship, see George Ella, “John Newton’s Friendship with William Cowper, <https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/john-newtons-friendship-william-cowper>.

[4]William Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.”

[5]Josiah Bull, *The Life of John Newton* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007; reprinted 2020), 317.

[6]Bull, 262.

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JOE CRIDER

Within the Veil

*Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
and mortal life shall cease:
I shall possess, within the veil,
a life of joy and peace.*

John Newton's Amazing Grace was originally titled "Faith's Review and Expectation." By faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Newton "reviewed" his life to see it from the lens of reality: "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me!" One of the enduring qualities of Amazing Grace is that believers have identified with the brutal honesty of the text as they reflect and personalize the darkness of their past and the hope of their future in Christ.

The preacher-hymn writer beautifully and poetically captured his "life in review" and his eternal "expectation" of hope everlasting in verse five of this powerful and popular hymn: "Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail, And mortal life shall cease, I shall possess, within the veil, A life of joy and peace." For Newton, there was no question as to "if" his flesh would give out and "if" his heart would stop beating; it was for him, "when" the cessation of life would take place. Indeed, the day will come when "mortal life shall cease."

But for Newton, and subsequently those of us who have the joy and privilege of singing this hymn, there seems to be implications far beyond the ultimate last expansion of air in the lungs and the final beat of the heart. Throughout the hymn, "Amazing Grace," the wise pastor might

also be pointing worshipers to the reality that flesh and hearts fail on a daily basis. There is no lack of sin in the life any believer, and a realization of such a reality is a step toward a “life of joy and peace” through the work of Jesus Christ.

In the compilation of the Letters of John Newton, first published in 1960, Newton wrote the following in his missive titled, “Christ All-Sufficient:”

We are never more safe, never have more reason to expect the Lord's help, than when we are most sensible that we can do nothing without him. This was the lesson Paul learnt, to rejoice in his own poverty and emptiness, that the power of Christ might rest upon him. Could Paul have done anything, Jesus would not have had the honour of doing all. This way of being saved entirely by grace, from first to last, is contrary to our natural wills: it mortifies self, leaving it nothing to boast of...in truth, such a poverty of spirit is the best mark we can have of an interest in his promises and care.”[1]

To the recipient of the letter, Newton makes it clear that salvation is “entirely by grace.” Life itself is lived in the power of Christ alone and there is reason for believers to rejoice in their poverty. As the Apostle Paul reminded the church at Corinth: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2 Cor. 12:9).

The “life of joy and peace” will indeed come when Christ calls the believer home, but there is the very present reality that believers have a place “already” in the heavenlies seated next to Christ as they submit to the certainty that we can do “nothing without him.” As the Apostle Paul reminded the church at Ephesus and us: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4-7). Newton reminds believers of the eternal “joy and peace” that will eventually come “on that day.” But there is a prevailing realism in the “immeasurable riches of his grace toward us in Christ Jesus” as we live life now.

Even though mortal life will cease and our hearts will stop, Newton turns the darkest of realities into a glorious hope in just a few choice words: “I shall possess within the veil, a life of hope and peace.” The veil refers to the curtain that functioned to separate the holy place from the holy of holies in the temple. In other words, the prohibitive function of the veil conveyed the restrictive nature placed on Israelite worship.[2] But for those in Christ, the access to God was made complete. As the writer of Hebrews describes: “Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have

confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

“Within the veil” verbalizes a metaphor as poetically intense as it is theologically profound. It carries with it an amazingly pertinent and diverse body of gracious gifts given to believers that all arise from the broken and torn body of Christ—“that is, his body”—that constituted the heart of his work of reconciliation. “Within the veil” we have forgiveness. “Within the veil” we are justified. “Within the veil” we are reconciled to our most dangerous enemy. “Within the veil” redemption from the slave-block of iniquity is executed. “Within the veil” the promise and energy for sanctification reside. “Within the veil” the certainty of perseverance is rooted. “Within the veil” assurance becomes a source of unmitigated joy. “Within the veil” the opening of death into heaven and eternal life makes that final breath an entrance to the status of “far better” (Philippians 1:23).

Another compelling word fittingly placed by Newton in verse five is the term, “possess.” In context he writes, “*Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail, And mortal life shall cease, I shall possess, within the veil, A life of joy and peace.*” Through the completed work of Christ, Newton encourages worshipers to know without a doubt that Jesus owns and holds and keeps their position for them within the veil – within the presence of the most Holy God. Believers possess their place within the veil not because of their efforts, but because of Christ’s perfect sacrifice.

And as believers look forward to the day beyond this mortal life, there is a perfect hope and perfect “joy and peace” yet to come. In another letter, Newton wrote: “The state of true believers, compared with that of others, is always blessed. If they are born from above, and united to Jesus, they are delivered from condemnation, and are heirs of eternal life, and may therefore well be accounted happy.”[3]

The truths succinctly and beautifully articulated in just a few lines of a hymn remind us to “review” our lives and live them in the light of Christ’s presence now and in “expectation” of eternity, and we will surely “be accounted happy.”

NOTES:

[1] Newton, John. Letters of John Newton. (London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 178.

[2] Daniel Gurtner, "The Veil Was Torn in Two: What Happened on Good Friday." *Desiring God*, accessed June 26, 2023, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-veil-was-torn-in-two> 2019.

[3] Newton. *Letters*, 148.

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JOE NESOM

Amazing Grace in the Return of The Lord

*The sun shall soon dissolve like snow,
the moon forbear to shine;
but God, who called me here below,
will be forever mine.*

Newton's Collage.

Long before twentieth artists like Pablo Picasso began to use the technique of collage, employing a collection of objects in their work, and long before Charles Ives wrote his Second Symphony, incorporating quotations from America's history like *Columbia the Gem of the Ocean* or the folk hymn *Bringing in the Sheaves*, John Newton gave us a theological collage in the hymn "Amazing Grace."

While most hymns keep the thematic boundaries close that is not the case with *Amazing Grace*. It is true that the grace of God is the overarching theme. But Newton makes clear that this grace of God had confronted him with his wretchedness and that implies the preaching of the law and the conviction that comes from it. His heart would know fear because grace had caused him to see the perfection of the righteousness of the Lord. He takes us from this convicting work of God to the awakening of his soul, and leads us to see where that the journey of sanctification leads. His collage honors the word of God in the fourth verse and the sureness of the promises

of the Lord to protect us in this life. In verse five he reminds us of our mortality but like Paul sees that day as a doorway into the very presence of Christ. It is a little strange that, with this doctrinal variety, Newton would not have celebrated the death and resurrection of Christ in an explicit way.

But like the book of Esther which never mentions the name of the Lord directly, apparently for literary effect, Newton gives us a hymn that does not mention the cross but honors it as many others fail to do. He has set us on the pilgrim journey and assured us that the Lord is trustworthy. Many Christians having sung the words hundreds of times, “When we’ve been there ten thousand years bright shining as the Sun, we’ve no less day to sing God’s praise than when we first begun,” would be surprised to discover that Newton did not write them. What Newton wrote about the future is usually not sung and that is a shame because Newton’s verse is glorious. Here is how it reads, *The sun shall soon dissolve like snow, the moon forbear to shine, but God who called me here below will be forever mine.*

The sun shall soon dissolve like snow, the moon forbear to shine.

The End of the Present Order and the Beginning of the New

John Newton, writing over a millennium and a half after the crucifixion of our Lord, speaks about the “soon” destruction of the present order. How can Newton speak in this way? The apostle Peter tells us that scoffers will come who question the second appearance of the Lord. But Peter reminds us that the example of the flood should cause us to understand that the end of time will be like Noah’s day. The flood came and took them all away. Only Noah and his family were saved. It is the same with our blessed hope for the resurrection of the body and the removal of the sin touched order. With the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. That day will come, but as a thief in the night. The Lord Jesus Christ will appear without warning. When the apostles asked about the destruction of the temple (Christ had said that not one stone would be left standing) the Lord gave them several signs to look for before the destruction of the temple and the horrible conquest of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But of the final day of judgement the Lord prophesied no signs. He told his disciples “That day” would catch many by surprise. Like the flood in Noah’s day many would be taken away to judgement.

Nothing that happens at the coming of the Lord will overshadow the accomplishment of his first advent. When the Lord first appeared on the earth almost two thousand years ago, he came to establish God’s kingdom in perfection. He came to bring righteousness to the earth in a way that had never been known before. He came to bring God’s eternal life to the people of God. All these things were accomplished by his death and resurrection. He is reigning above and

interceding for his own. The battle for the souls of God's elect people is proceeding and Christ is going forth to conquer the foe. Satan's doom is sure. The return of our Lord will bring to fulfillment all the things that were won by his death and resurrection. But the time of the Lord's return is unknown.

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Matthew 24:36)

When you hear of someone who claims to be able to predict the time of the Lord's appearance, you may write them off as a charlatan, or at best a very confused person. No one knows the time of Christ's return. You may say, "but didn't the Lord speak about earthquakes, and famines, and wars and rumors of wars that would take place just prior to his return?" "Aren't there signs that we can look for?" The Lord did speak of such things but specifically warned us not to be alarmed. These were signs of the beginning and of the sure proclamation of the gospel to all the nations. (Matthew 24:1-14)

The Lord will come at an hour which will be characterized by its normalcy. He taught that the time of his return would find the people of this world doing the things that they were doing when the flood of Noah came upon them and took them all away. (Matthew 24:37-40) They were eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage (normal human behavior). They did these things right up until the time that Noah and his family boarded the ark. They did not expect the judgement of God to fall on them. They would go on doing the things that human beings do and there would be no accountability for sin. Or so they thought.

Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. (Matthew 24:41)

Just as the wicked people of Noah's time were "taken away" to judgment by the flood so the coming of our Lord will divide humanity into two parts, those who are taken away to judgment and those who are not.

Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. (Matthew 24:42)

The Bible teaches the imminent return of Christ. He may not come today, but we do not know that. We must not think that there are so many things to be fulfilled, before his return, that we may rest a while. We must be ready. The Lord taught several parables which emphasize this truth. He spoke about the master of a house that went away to a wedding banquet. His servants were expected to be alert and ready to open the door immediately on his return. (Luke 12:35-40) On another occasion he spoke about the owner of a house who would in time close the door of

the house. Those outside would knock and plead with him, but he would tell them “I don’t know you or where you come from.” (Luke 13:22-30)

The Lord will return in bodily form. Luke gave us an account of the ascension of the Lord after his resurrection from the dead. The Lord was taken up into heaven before the eyes of his apostles and hidden from their sight by a cloud. Two “men” dressed in white appeared and spoke to the apostles in this way,

“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”
(Acts 1:9-11)

The clear teaching is this. Our Lord ascended bodily and was concealed from sight, one day he will be revealed again in bodily form and will descend from above.

And the second coming of Christ will also bring about a union of the church militant and the church triumphant. One of the oldest confessions of faith speaks of the communion of saints. This is not merely a reference to the fellowship of living Christians, but includes the common experience of salvation through Christ, which is shared by the living and the dead. Thousands who came to faith in Christ while living here on the earth are now with the Lord. They live in heaven with him and are far better off for it. They have traditionally been called the church triumphant while those who are still here in this world are thought of as the church militant, the church on the march against the forces of evil here below. The Bible teaches us that the church triumphant will return with our Lord.

We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17)

This very important passage teaches us that the return of Christ will not be a hidden event. There will be a loud command, the voice of the archangel will be heard, and the trumpet call of God will sound. The second coming will be a noisy event. One cannot miss it. All people will know that Christ our Lord has returned. Christians will rejoice, but the lost will be terrified because of their sins and the judgement to come. As we have seen, the dead will be raised. This is true of both the righteous and the unrighteous.

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. (John 5:28-29)

The Lord did not call the experience of the resurrected unbelievers “life.” Only the righteous really “live.” The wicked exist in a state of eternal torment. Hell becomes their dwelling place forever. But all the dead shall be raised. The Bible does not give us much information concerning the bodily existence of those who are eternally lost. But there is quite a bit of information concerning the future state of the redeemed. Since we will be “like Christ,” it is instructive to remember that he even ate with his disciples after he had been resurrected from the dead. Our existence will not be a shadowy matter but the reality of our life, in that new day, will be, if anything, far more real than life in this world. And our new body will be one that is designed for perfect fellowship with our God. All sin and mortality (which is the result of sin) will now be past. The immortal life of God will be ours in truth. As Paul said,

... we shall bear the likeness of the man from heaven. (1 Corinthians 15:49)

The return of our Lord will also bring in the final judgment of God, which will be a judgment based on principles of righteousness. The Scriptures teach us that all must face this judgment.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

Those who try to stand before the righteous judge in that day, without the grace of God to shield them, will only know the wrath of the Lamb of God. Their sins will be judged, and their “righteous acts” will be shown to be nothing more than filthy rags in the sight of God. Those who know Christ will also be judged on principles of righteousness but will have the continuing intercession of the Son of God. They will be shown mercy for their sins, and their works which were done as the result of the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit, will be recognized as pure and acceptable in the sight of God.

The return of our Lord will mean the end of the present creation and the revelation of a new heaven and a new earth. The old creation has been spoiled by Adam’s fall and the sins of subsequent generations. It must and will be replaced. A new creation has already come in Christ. The death and resurrection of our Lord brought in a new and perfect order. That new order has been advancing against the forces of evil for many years. One day the Lord himself will return and we will see the unveiling of Christ’s perfection and the glorious character of his kingdom. That kingdom will displace all others. We may love the country in which we were born. We may be strongly patriotic. But the mature Christian comes to understand that we are first and

foremost citizens of God's kingdom, and it is the only kingdom that will endure for all eternity.

And there will no longer be a great divide between heaven and earth. (Revelation 21:1) In other words, the dwelling place of God and the dwelling place of man will have been brought together by the graciousness of our God. In a sense, we will dwell on the earth forever. Earth, our dwelling place will have been created new, and there will be no essential difference between heaven and earth. But the significant thing is that we will be able to live in the very presence of our God because we will have been brought to perfection ourselves. We were once justified before God despite our sins because of God's grace given us in Christ. We were sanctified by the continuing work of God in us over the years of our lives. But on that day, we will be glorified. We will know the perfection of absolute holiness. We will truly be righteous as our Lord is righteous. There will be no more tears. (Revelation 21:4) There will be no more sin. (Revelation 21:8) The same passage teaches that Christ will have made his church splendid in holiness. The figures of this passage do not describe the literal streets of heaven; they set before us the splendors of the church in all her redeemed glory. We are told that we will have entered an eternal day. Light is a symbol of truth and righteousness in scripture. There will be no need for the sun. We will have the light of God's presence forever. And there will be perfect joy and satisfaction. We will drink the water of life.

And then, at the end of this most famous hymn, Newton reminds us of God's call to undeserving sinners.

But God who called me here below will be forever mine.

The General Call

The children of God have heard the call of God. The apostle Paul tells us that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. The proclamation of the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection for our sins is the heart of Christian experience. We must hear that we are sinners who have broken the laws of God and deserve hell. And we must hear that we should look away from ourselves to Christ and his perfect righteousness. He alone has the perfect obedience that we need.

And so, the church preaches Christ. We preach Christ with the truth of holy scripture. We preach the gospel events and with Paul say that these truths are the things of first importance. As individuals we preach Christ when we are baptized. Without a spoken word we say to those who are present, "Christ died for me to take my sins away and he was raised for me to give me eternal life." And when the church gathers around the Lord's table, we preach Christ. There we see the Lord's body and blood, and together with all our brothers and sisters in the Lord we

remember his death as our atonement. And we eat the bread and drink the cup. Thus, we preach his sustaining life. As we are nourished by his body and blood, we preach again the resurrection life of the Lord.

But there is another work of the Lord, another calling of God that Newton had experienced. That work of God is the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit.

Effectual Calling

Which comes first —the new birth or repentance and faith?

The order is this, first comes regeneration or the new birth by the Spirit. Then repentance and faith in Christ come as the result of the work of God. The Baptist Faith and Message puts it this way,

Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace.

Notice the order. First there is the new birth. Then repentance and faith appear. They are “inseparable experiences of grace.” If you have been born again, you will repent. If you have been born again, you will believe in Christ. These things have come to us because of the grace of God. He has given us new life. He has given us the ability to repent when others do not. He has given us faith in Christ when others do not believe in him. On one occasion the Lord even told some of his enemies that the reason they did not believe in him was because the Father had not enabled them to do so. (John 6:60-65) One might say, “But I thought that God gives us new life because we repent. Isn’t repentance the condition for being born again?” Not according to the Lord Jesus Christ. He told Nicodemus,

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. (John3:8)

Can you and I control the wind? Do we arise each day and decide how fast the wind will blow or from what direction the wind will come? Can we stop a tornado from creating havoc as it passes through a defenseless town? Of course not. The wind blows where it pleases. Do you see the point that the Lord is making? We cannot control or direct the Spirit of God in his work of imparting new life to sinners. He regenerates. He resurrects to new life. He causes us to be “born again.” The wind of the Spirit must blow. That is why we pray for the Holy Spirit to come

to our friends and relatives who do not know the Lord. We ask God to save them. We know that if they are to come to Christ, they must be drawn to him by the work of God. The Lord Jesus said,

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. (John 5:24-25)

The Lord was not speaking about the last day when the dead will be raised from their graves. That is clear because, just after he spoke these words, he began to talk about that day.

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out . . . (John 5:28-29a)

We are dead in our sins. We cannot help ourselves. God must come to our rescue. He has done that by sending his Son to die in the place of sinners on the cross. But that atoning work must be applied to us individually, and that is the work of God's Spirit. The Father chose us in eternity. The Son died for his people in time and history. And the Holy Spirit brings the benefits of Christ's death to us. He brings with him the resurrection life of Christ. With the same power that raised the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead he touches us as we lie spiritually helpless, dead before God. Suddenly we rise from our spiritual grave. We believe the gospel. We believe in Christ. We depend on him to save us. In our dead state we did not love God. Now we love him because he first loved us. We did not love our fellow man. Now we love even those that we once hated. All this is the miraculous result of the new birth. The Lord has touched us with resurrection power. We are truly alive for the first time. We have been born again! We must make clear that the Holy Spirit, in accomplishing this work of God, uses the word of God. The preaching of the gospel is an essential part of the Holy Spirit's regenerating work.

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. (1 Peter 1:23)

There must be a presentation of the truths of the gospel if a sinner is to come to Christ for salvation. But the external call to receive Christ as Lord and Savior cannot save if it stands alone. There must also be an internal work of God. The Holy Spirit must hover over us as surely as he hovered over the formless void. Just as the voice of God said "let there be light" so the Holy Spirit brings light to our dark world. He says to each of our dead souls, arise! It is like the Lord Jesus Christ appearing before the tomb of Lazarus and shouting for the dead man to come forth. And, just as Lazarus was called from death to life by the power of God, so we are raised by God's

powerful work for us. But Lazarus died again. Not so with those who are born again. The life that began with the new birth will never end.

John Newton had heard both the external call and he had “heard” the precious call that comes from the Spirit of God. He could look forward to the blessings of heaven, when the earth dissolves like snow because he had been called by the Lord to an amazing salvation by grace!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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