

AMAZING GRACE

An Amazing Man

John Newton, the man who wrote the hymn entitled 'Amazing Grace', was very glad to set foot on the Inishowen Peninsula after his badly-damaged ship anchored in Lough Swilly in the aftermath of a fierce storm. This amazing man was born on 24 July 1725. His mother died just before his seventh birthday. His father was the captain of a merchant ship sailing the Mediterranean. John left school when he was ten years old. At the age of eleven he went to sea with his father and accompanied him on several voyages. John was press-ganged into the Navy where he served as a midshipman. He later deserted but was apprehended, publicly flogged and then demoted from his position. Before he reached the age of twenty he became an apprentice to a slave-trader and was based on some of the islands near Sierra Leone.

At one stage he was no more than a slave himself. During this time he was mistreated and became seriously ill. His bed was a board and his pillow a wooden log. He lived on scraps of food and was so ill he was expected to die. Miraculously he recovered and was later rescued by the captain of a ship. They set sail for England in January of 1748. Their ship was in need of repair and was in no condition to withstand any great storms they might encounter during their 7,000 mile journey.

An Amazing Storm

One night John was roused from sleep by a violent storm which engulfed the ship and almost wrecked it. The crew manned the pumps against the incoming sea. They used their bedding and even their own clothes to repair the leaks, nailing old boards over them. The ship had a gaping hole in its side and would have gone down but for the fact that the cargo of beeswax and wood was light. Most of their provisions, livestock and water were lost, so for the rest of the voyage they survived on scanty rations. Gale force winds drove them out of the shipping lanes, so there was little possibility of them being rescued by another vessel. Just when all hope of rescue was lost the wind came round to their advantage. It brought them within sight of Tory Island. The following day (8 April) they anchored in Lough Swilly. It was four weeks from the day of the great storm. Shortly after dropping anchor the wind became so violent that John was convinced they would have been shipwrecked and lost if they had been caught in it.

An Amazing Encounter

Many years later, as John reflected on his experience during the great storm at sea, he was reminded of the fact that while the fierce storm had been raging outside, another was raging inside his heart. As he attempted to repair the gaping holes in the ship John remarked, "If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us." But he wondered if there could be mercy for someone like him. He considered some portions of the Scriptures, including the following, where the Lord says, "I called you so often, but you wouldn't come. I reached out to you, but you paid no attention. You ignored my advice and rejected the correction I offered. So I will laugh when you are in trouble! I will mock you when disaster overtakes you—when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster engulfs you like a cyclone, and anguish and distress overwhelm you. "When they cry for help, I will not answer. Though they anxiously search for me, they will not find me. For they hated knowledge and chose not to fear the LORD. They rejected my advice and paid no attention when I corrected them. Therefore, they must eat the bitter fruit of living their own way, choking on their own schemes."¹

John had, in the past, professed piety, but later returned to a life of unrestrained blasphemy, debauchery and godlessness. Now he wondered if there was still mercy to be found. As he meditated upon the death of Jesus he felt there may be some hope of forgiveness. He read

in Luke Ch.15 the account of the Prodigal Son. He was struck by the fact that the father lovingly ran to meet his wayward son. He understood this to be an illustration of the Lord's mercy to repentant, returning sinners.

John began to pray. During the great storm he cried out to the Lord, believing that He alone could deliver him. He saw the battered ship as an example of his own life. It was wrecked and hopelessly lost, with no hope of being rescued by human effort. In the midst of the howling gale he came to understand the truth of the Gospel. For the first time in his life he realised that God could not pardon a sinner on the grounds of his own efforts or merits. He could pardon him only because of the fact that Jesus Christ, by dying as his substitute, had paid in full the penalty for his sins. As this light began to dawn in John's heart the inner storm subsided and a peaceful calm set in. While the ship was refitting at Lough Swilly he had a further encounter with the Lord, during which he surrendered his life to Him.

Amazing Grace

Some years later John became a preacher of the Gospel. He also wrote a number of hymns, including the one entitled 'Amazing Grace'. This Hymn was, in fact, his personal testimony to the amazing Grace of God in rescuing a wicked sinner. In verse one he says, "I once was lost, but now am found." When he wrote the words, "I once was lost," he was referring to his past condition. This is summed up in the Scriptures as follows: 'Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else..'²

John then changes the emphasis from his past condition to his present standing with God. He wrote, "I once was lost, but now am found." The Word of God shows us how a vile sinner like John Newton could be forgiven, cleansed and transformed through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul writes, 'Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.'³ But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.'⁴ For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light!' ⁵ He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins'.⁶

Amazing Salvation

John Newton wrote of the Amazing Grace of God (His unmerited favour to the sinner). Salvation is something the sinner could never earn or merit. The Scriptures make it clear that 'He saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit'.⁷

The Grace of God was demonstrated when He sent His only begotten Son to the cross as a substitute for sinners - 'Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else?'⁸ He freely bestows the gift of Salvation on all who repent of their sins and put their faith in Christ - 'God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God.'⁹ For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people.'¹⁰

John Newton put his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and found peace with God - 'Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of

what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.”¹¹ He now knew he was saved, and could write of the assurance of salvation: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” He knew he had been saved, not just from a watery grave, but from a far worse fate – eternity in hell. He knew that not only had God’s Grace saved him, but that it would keep him, day by day, and then finally take him Home to Heaven. He expressed this assurance in the following words - “ ’Tis Grace hath brought me safe thus far, and Grace will lead me Home.”

Amazing Invitation

And what about you, dear Friend? Perhaps you have often heard, or even sung ‘Amazing Grace’? But have you ever seriously considered the words of this hymn? John Newton recognised his lost condition. Have you? He knew he could never be saved as a result of his own efforts. Do you? He knew his only hope of salvation lay in Christ’s substitutionary death on his behalf. Do you? He repented of his sins. Have you? He put his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Have you? He had the assurance of Salvation. Do you? He knew he would go to Heaven one day. Do you?

Why not do like John and call upon the Lord, asking Him to save you? ‘For “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”¹² Jesus said, “Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.”¹³

Could it be that the Lord is knocking on the door of your heart, the door of your life right now? Will you invite Him in? ‘For God says, “At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you. Indeed, the “right time” is now. Today is the day of salvation’.¹⁴

‘Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”¹⁵

God’s Amazing Grace can meet you at the very point of your need.

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Scripture References

1: Proverbs 1 v 24-31	2: Ephesians 2 v 1, 3	3:1 Corinthians 6 v 11
4: Ephesians 2 v 13	5: Ephesians 5 v 8	6: Ephesians 1 v 7
7: Titus 3 v 5	8: Romans 8 v 32	9: Ephesians 2 v 8
10: Titus 2 v 11	11: Romans 5 v 1	12: Romans 10 v 13
13: Revelation 3 v 20	14: 2 Corinthians 6 v 2	15: Matthew 11 v 28