# Ephesians 2, various Scriptures October 27, 2019

*Tried and True: Amazing Grace*

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Starting today and continuing through the next three Sundays we are looking at four hymns of our faith that we sing many times throughout the church year – hymns that have been tried musically and have been found to be sing-able and memorable, and more importantly hymns that have been tried theologically, and have been found to bring important biblical truths to our hearts, our minds, and our spirits over time. So, our 4-week series is naturally entitled “Tried and True.” Today we are focusing on what is arguably the most well-known hymn throughout the centuries and throughout the world – *Amazing Grace*.

Let’s pray: *Thank you, Heavenly Father, for the grace you have given to us through the truth of your Word, through the work of your Son, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, and through the gift of your Church. Open our ears, our hearts, and our spirits to receive what you alone can give, so that we can give the grace that so many need to receive. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

John Newton, who wrote *Amazing Grace* was born in London in 1725 (41 years before this congregation was founded). He was the only child of a sea captain and a churchgoing woman. His mother taught him to read the Bible and go to church, but she died when Newton was only seven years old. From that time on he became a troubled and trouble-making boy. However, he never forgot the lessons his mother taught him.

As a young man, Newton fell in love with a young woman named Mary, and when he was 19, while traveling to see her, he fell victim to a "press gang." A press gang was a group of men who would forcibly enlist others in a place of service. The press gang forced John Newton to join the crew of a ship, where discipline was harsh, and the food was horrible and scarce. Newton's spirit was nearly broken. His mother's God seemed far away and uncaring. When he tried and failed to escape, the ship's captain had him stripped and flogged.

Later Newton was transferred to another ship, and he became involved in the brutal 18th-century slave trade. The work was horrific and cost many human lives. Yet at the time it was legal—and made a lot of money for a lot of people. John Newton became known for his wild behavior (he almost drowned after falling off a ship in drunkenness), and he became known for openly mocking faith in God. He seemed as far away from God as he could get.

In 1748, at 23 years old, Newton was on board a slaving ship called the *Greyhound*. The ship was in bad shape. During a violent storm, it began to fall apart and take on water. A crew member was swept overboard. All night long Newton tried to keep the ship from going under. And he thought about the state of his life. He knew he had run from God, hurt other people, and made a wreck out of his own situation. He had even mocked the truth of what Jesus had done.

John Newton realized he might die in the storm and he wondered if God would still be forgiving, even after Newton had rejected Him? This is when he remembered what his mother had taught him from the Bible: God loves to show mercy even to those who believe they are beyond his reach. He remembered Scriptures he thought were long lost to his memory. For the first time in many years, John Newton asked God to help him. The date was March 21, 1748 – a day throughout the rest of his life that he remembered with thanksgiving. As an old man on the same date he wrote in his diary, *“Not well able to write, but I endeavor to observe the return of this day with humiliation, prayer, and praise.”*

It didn't happen overnight, but Newton's life began to change. He learned to pray. He found friends who shared his faith and could help him understand how it applied to his life. Eventually he gave up his role in the slave trade and stopped sailing for a living. In 1764, at the age of 39, John Newton began 43 years of preaching the good news of the Gospel of Christ.

For his Sunday evening services, he often composed a hymn which helped to develop and teach the lessons and Scripture for the evening. In 1779, two hundred and eighty of his hymns were published in a hymnbook called the *Olney Hymns*. The most famous of those hymns, “Faith’s Review and Expectation,” grew out of David’s exclamation in 1 Chronicles 17:16-17, *“Who am I, Lord God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?****17****And as if this were not enough in your sight, my God, you have spoken about the future of the house of your servant. You, Lord God, have looked on me as though I were the most exalted of men.”* We know this hymn of course as *Amazing Grace*.

John Newton’s thoughts on the African Slave Trade, based on his own experiences as a slave trader, were very important in ending slavery in his country. He lived to be 82 years old. Towards the end of his life he said, *“My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.”*

Do you see how God took the fullness of John Newton’s life, the prayers and faithfulness of his mother, the Word of God, the loss of his mother, the years on the sea including his years as a slave trader, including a near-death experience through a violent storm and a rickety ship, to bring forth a fruitful life for Christ?

If we are looking, we can see evidence of God’s grace in our lives, day in and day out. Meaning what? Meaning that we can see how God is working to help us make our lives fruitful for him. Here’s an example. On Wednesday morning I woke up with the thought in my mind that I should go over to the hospital in Chambersburg to visit Betty & Kenny Wenger’s daughter, Jackie who had just had a double knee replacement. So, instead of heading right over to Spring Run from my driveway I headed to the hospital. As I was walking up to the doors, I noticed I had a missed call from Chester Perry. I called him back and he told me that Kay had broken her hip and was on the 2nd floor in the hospital. When I went to the desk to get Jackie’s room number, I discovered that she wasn’t even in our hospital. She was in Carlisle! But God knew that Kay was there, and he worked it out for me to make the most of the time we have for each day to be with her that morning. I see that as God’s grace. And it happens in our lives all the time, folks, if we are looking for it. Little signs of God’s hand leading and guiding us to be his people in the world and do his gospel work.

I’m certain that John Newton was thinking about this kind of grace in his life, the day to day leading and guiding that is present in the lives of those who love him and want to serve him when he wrote *Amazing Grace*. But I am more certain that John Newton was thinking about the immeasurable gift of God’s grace that transferred his soul from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light when he wrote the words to the hymn.

I’m talking about grace that can be defined as God’s favor toward the unworthy or God’s mercy for the undeserving. John Newton understood what we all need to understand. As sinners, as those who are continually choosing against what God has shown us is right and best, as sinners, we deserve nothing from God except the punishment of eternal separation from him. We are owed nothing. We deserve nothing from God.

* We were born in sin. Psalm 51:5, *“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”*
* We were guilty of breaking God’s holy laws. Romans 3:11, *“There is no one righteous, not even one.”*
* We were enemies of God. Romans 5:10, *“While we were God’s enemies…”*
* We were deserving of death. Romans 6:23, *“For the wages of sin is death…”*
* We were unable to save ourselves. Romans 3:20, *“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law.”*
* We were desperate, blind, unclean, and dead in our sin heading to eternal separation from God. And then God extended his hand of mercy, his love, and his favor to us.
* Jesus said in Mark 2:17, *"Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners”*
* God’s grace saves us. Ephesians 2:8, *“For it is by grace you have been saved, though faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast.”*
* Grace is what the gospel is all about. Acts 20:24, *“I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.”*
* Grace gives us victory over sin. James 4:6, *“He gives us more grace. God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”*
* Grace gives us gives us eternal comfort and good hope. 2 Thessalonians 2:16, *“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”*
* Jesus IS grace and IS truth. John 1:14, *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*
* God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s forgiveness, God’s acceptance, God’s calling on our lives is a gift of grace. Ephesians 4:7, *“But to each one of us grace has been given.”*

**We owe nothing in return for God’s grace.**

**It is free. It is ours to keep.**

**It keeps on giving.**

2 Corinthians 5:17-18 are two of the most beloved verses in the New Testament. *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”* By God’s grace, when we say ‘Yes’ to Jesus, when we do as Romans 10:9 tells us, *“Confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead,”* by God’s grace we are saved. We are saved from eternal death apart from God and saved for eternal life with God! Period. Done deal. Saved by God’s grace through Jesus’ work on the cross for you and me. Here are the three things that are gone in that moment when you give your life to Christ:

1. Our separation from God is gone. We have been brought near. We are now part of his family.
2. Our eternal penalty for sin is gone, i.e. death apart from God. Jesus paid it all.
3. Our bondage to sin is gone. We no longer have to be controlled by the sin that so easily entangles us.

Because of God’s grace, those are the three things that are gone. The old is gone! The new is here! We’d like to think that our temptation to sin is gone in that very moment, too! We’d like to think our lives would become more like Jesus in that very moment, too! We’d like to think that once we say ‘Yes’ to Jesus that it would be like walking into a changing room. Go in as a sinner. Come out holy and happy just like Jesus!

But the Scriptures are very clear here. There’s GRACE and there’s grace. Both are necessary and needed. But it’s the Saving Grace that transfers our souls from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. That’s miraculous! That’s amazing – that God saw a wretched sinner like me and did not turn away. That God saw you in all your sinning messiness and did not turn away. That God did ALL the work necessary to save us, even while we were still sinners. That’s God’s saving GRACE. This, I think is the grace John Newton couldn’t get over, couldn’t stop thinking about, couldn’t stop preaching about, couldn’t stop writing and singing about. God’s saving GRACE that brought him from the dead-end way of thinking about and serving no one but self, to thinking about and serving the one who saved him – Jesus Christ the risen Savior!

Once we grab hold of this, once we really understand that we are saved not by being good, or promising to be good, but we are saved by the gift of God’s grace proven to us through Jesus’ work on the cross for us, once we understand this, our lives, like John Newton’s life, begin to change. Some change more quickly than others because of a variety of circumstances, but we can’t truly understand God’s saving grace in our lives and remain unchanged in our thinking, in our behavior, and in our attitude towards others. God’s saving grace changes people. It changed John Newton, and through him, a lot of other people. It changed me. And I pray it has changed you. Thanks be to God. Amen.