



Amazing Grace ~ The Lyrics and History (Jan 2002)

Have you ever really pondered the lyrics of this age-old favorite? This hymn was a staple in the church we attended when I was a boy. I heard it, lost then found, blind & now has sight, but I didn't fully grasp the true depth and meaning of its message. It was a favorite of mine for years ~ but now it looks different, it sounds different, and I am suddenly moved very deeply by its relevance in my own life.

I hope you too may be blessed with these symbolic words of God's grace, love and mercy.

Amazing Grace

1779

*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.*

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

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

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

*Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

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

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.*
-Anonymous, XIX century

No matter how many people have loved this hymn and have been blessed by its message - and there have been thousands and thousands - no one has ever had a more complete understanding of the words than the author himself had. Whether he wrote the hymn to be used at his wife's funeral, as some have claimed, or whether he wrote it to reflect the great change that had taken place in his own life, it is a marvelous picture of the transforming power, and the all-sufficiency of divine grace. Having drunk heavily and long at the cistern of sin, Newton was awed by this grace that had brought him into the sharp contrast of partaking freely of the fountain of living water; the water of eternal life!

Who could measure the depth of this man's sin? His life at sea was so full of reckless abandon to sin as to be beyond estimate. But if we could not measure the depth of his sin, how much less are we able to measure the sovereign grace that removed his sin from him "as far as the east is from the west."

Newton (1725-1807) said of his past, "Had you seen me go by, so pensive and solitary in the dead of night, to wash my one shirt upon the rocks, and afterwards put it on wet that it might dry upon my back while I slept; had you seen me so poor a figure that when a ship's boat came to the island, shame often compelled me to hide myself in the woods from the sight of strangers; especially had you known that my conduct, principles, and heart were still darker than my outward condition how little would you have imagined that one, who so fully answered to the 'hateful and hating one another' of the apostle, was reserved to be so peculiar an instance of the providential care and exuberant goodness of God."

Usually when someone who has been in the clutches of sin repents of that sin, people begin to ask, "What happened? What caused him to turn to the Lord?" There were several influences that figured in Newton's conversion. First of all - and this should be a challenge to all godly parents - his conversion is proof of the Scripture that

says, "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). Even though Newton's mother died when Newton was seven, she had trained her boy well in the Scriptures. At the age of four he could answer questions on the catechism and could recite a number of passages of Scripture and some of Dr. Watts' hymns. Mrs. Newton often said to her young son, "I am praying that someday you will become a minister of the Word of God."

A second influence in Newton's conversion was his sweetheart, Mary Catlett, who later became his wife. John and Mary met under interesting circumstances. Mr. Newton, concerned about the welfare of his wayward son, made arrangements for John to go to Jamaica for several years. But first John was allowed to visit some of his mother's distant relatives. While visiting them, John fell in love with a girl, not yet fourteen, by the name of Mary Catlett. The thought of several years in Jamaica without this girl became intolerable to John; and he, always quick to figure a way out for himself, prolonged his visit until the ship to Jamaica had sailed. This was not the only time John tried this trick. And it was not the only time his disappointed and enraged father threatened to disown him!

During the years of John's horrible traffic in slaves—years of such despondency and discouragement that he thought of drowning himself - the memory of sweet Mary Catlett sustained him. Mary took every means to keep Newton informed of her love, her concern, and her prayers. Often she would ask captains of various ships to try to locate Newton and tell him that she loved him and was praying for him. The two were married on February 1, 1750, and they spent forty years together, lovingly devoted to one another.

Other influences that figured largely in bringing the penitent to the throne of mercy were his deliverance from a malignant fever in Africa, serving with a godly captain of good testimony on one of the ships, and the reading of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. (If you have never read this fine devotional work, I would suggest that you get a copy and read it.)

But perhaps the event that brought into sharpest focus Newton's need of a Saviour was an experience in a violent storm at sea. As the storm in its fury lashed heavy waves against Newton's ship, many of the most hardened seamen cowered in some corner, seeking protection. During the height of the storm, someone uttered an oath using the name of God. The sound of that Holy Name, even in an oath, struck home; and Newton's thoughts turned to his godly mother who had so carefully taught him about God and about God's Word. As Newton continued to do his part to try to steady the ship, he prayed, "O God, if Thou wilt get me safely ashore, I will serve Thee forever." Gradually the storm ceased, and the ship and its crew landed safely in the harbor. Often people who in times of distress make a vow to the Lord forget the vow when the danger is past, but not John Newton! Although some authorities say that he continued in slave trade for a few years after his conversion (he was a new Christian and was not told that this was wrong), Newton finally surrendered himself completely to the Lord. Under the influence of Whitefield, Wesley, and other friends whom he came to know, he answered the call to preach.

Numbered among Newton's converts were Claudius Buchanan, a missionary to the East Indies, and Thomas Scott, a well-known Bible commentator. But one of Newton's closest friends was William Cowper, the poet. Together they published a songbook, *Olney Hymns* (1779), to be used by the plain people. Prior to this time, though psalm singing had given way to hymn singing in dissenting churches, the Church of England continued to reject it as "unscriptural, schismatic, and doctrinally dangerous." But *Olney Hymns* gave the people 349 attractive hymns.

Perhaps a fitting close to this brief biography of the man whose hymns contrast the life of sin with the change that is brought about by God's grace is the following anecdote from *Our Hymnody* by Robert Guy McCutchan:

When in his late years his eyes failed him so that he could not see to read his notes while preaching, he had an old servant accompany him to the pulpit . . . to point out the lines of his manuscript. One morning he read the words "Jesus Christ is precious," paused, and then repeated them. Thinking that Newton had become confused, the servant whispered, "Go on; go on, you said that before." Newton turned and said, "John, I said that twice, and I'm going to say it again." And his voice took on a different quality as he repeated more firmly than before, "Jesus Christ is precious!"

Most hymnals print only the first three of Newton's original six stanzas. Most add, however, an additional stanza, which Newton did not write, but which appeared anonymously in numerous nineteenth century American collections. Its first use as a final stanza of "Amazing Grace" was in 1910 in E. O. Excell's *Coronation Hymns*. Most people who know that Newton wrote the hymn also think erroneously that he wrote this now well-known final stanza.

The tune AMAZING GRACE, to which the words are nearly always sung, is an early American tune of unknown origin (although some in Scotland say that it was an anonymous Scottish tune before it became an anonymous American tune). Its earliest appearance seems to have been in the oblong tune book *Virginia Harmony* of 1831. Like so many other folk tunes set to hymn texts, it is completely pentatonic (that is, using only five different tones).

May we always remain ~ Amazed by His Grace!

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