

The Hymns We Sing
Sermons on the Great Hymns
Amazing Grace

With Study Questions

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Amazing Grace

A Gracious Command

We need not work too hard to prove the Scriptures call upon God's people to praise Him in song. For thirty-one verses Deborah and Barak praise God for their military victory against their enemy. The Psalms are full of deep intricate statements about the actions and character of God for which He is to be praised. It is nothing less than a gracious command when the Apostle Paul writes,

**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom,
teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns
and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord
(Colossians 3:16).**

Deep and Profound

The worship of God, sad but necessary, has become a matter of some controversy. Some argue Psalter only. Their argument isn't a bad one. It seems very safe to sing only Scripture; and since we don't have musical notes in the Bible, others argue no music. But how can we sing in unison without music? And isn't it possible to have the Scriptures only, but misunderstand them? Do not the Scriptures themselves instruct that they are to be taught and not merely read?

Others take one or two verses out of a Psalm and sing it over and over until a level of "spirituality" is experienced by the worshiper. One pastor suggested that it is an undue burden on the worshiper to have to wade through deep buckets of theology when they can just enjoy simple worship. As one lady said, "I like to buckle up and just go for the ride." But this hardly seems to be the biblical model and resembles more a form of chanting or mysticism.

Worship should be a combination of depth of thought and commitment of voice. We shouldn't find some comfortable little ditty and sing it over and over, in a sort of mantra fashion, until we reach a supposed level of spirituality. Our songs should, like the worship in Scripture, be deep and profound. The songs we sing should challenge the limitations of our thoughts about God and be a poetic expansion of our notions of His majesty. In this way He is properly glorified.

Worship Leaders

There is also to be a commitment of voice. We have musicians and worship leaders to promote unison and harmony. They are not designed to be

a choral prosthetic or a crutch for the congregation's lack of willingness to sing with a whole heart. We should sing with gusto and loyalty, not self-conscious and inhibited. In this our worship is glorious to God and a blessing to His people.

Without further delay, let us examine the words of some of the hymns we sing along with a brief history of the writing.

Newton

Amazing Grace was written by John Newton, 1725-1807. A marble plaque at St. Mary Woolnoth carried the epitaph which Newton himself wrote:

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,
restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach
the Gospel which he had long laboured to destroy.
He ministered,
Near sixteen years in Olney, in Bucks,
And twenty-eight years in this Church.

Newton was an 18th century slave trader out of England. As a young man he was spiritually nurtured by his mother who died when he was only eleven. He soon after went to sea and found himself involved in the brutal occupation of slave-trading. After reading Thomas à Kempis and having a near fatal experience at sea, Newton came to faith. For a while he continued slave-trading but with a more gentle hand; he even had church services on board his vessel. But in due time he came to realize the vile nature of his occupation and went into the ministry heavily influenced by George Whitefield.

Faith's Review and Expectation

Amazing Grace was originally entitled *Faith's Review and Expectation* along with a reference to First Chronicles, chapter 17, verses 16 and 17 which reads,

**Then King David went in and sat before the Lord; and he said:
"Who *am* I, O Lord God? And what is my house, that You have
brought me this far? ¹⁷And *yet* this was a small thing in Your
sight, O God; and You have *also* spoken of Your servant's house
for a great while to come, and have regarded me according to the
rank of a man of high degree, O Lord God.**

Amazing Grace

The following is a copy of the song in its completion closest to Newton's death. Let us consider the meaning of the words.

*Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That sav'd a wretch like me!*

Clearly the song heralds the grace of God. That is, the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to the exercise of the Christian virtues; our focus here being saving grace. Paul writes that we are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8, 9). It is not a combination of our faith and God's grace. It is God who saves us by granting us faith which saves.

A wretch is an unfortunate, miserable, vile or contemptible person. Some have argued this surely applied to Newton the slave trader but not to the common man; even taking it upon themselves to change the words of the hymn, making them less self-deprecating. But Paul, in the height of his ministry, continually recognized his wretched estate before God. God acknowledges the nobility of men before other men, as should we. But before God all are wretched. The acknowledgement of the depth of our wretchedness increases our comprehension of His amazing grace.

*I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Seeker-sensitive and centered churches are the rage. The *I Found It* campaign, which I took part in, in the late seventies, advanced the idea of finding a new life in Jesus Christ. But we are not the ones doing the finding. We are the ones who are found; As Jesus said, **"for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"** (Luke 19:10).

The gospels are not short of examples of Jesus giving sight to the blind. One thing about a blind person who is given sight – they will see. Will they enjoy seeing? No doubt! But the gift itself yields an irresistible result.

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears reliev'd;*

How foreign this is to the gospel I first heard. It is not in vogue to present a God who is to be feared; But Paul crescendos in his portrait of fallen man with the description **"There is no fear of God before their eyes"** (Roman 3:18). The fear of God must be taught, sought and cultivated. This is not a fear of

punishment (1 John 4:18) but a genuine recognition of the might and holiness of God. Needless to say, from Isaiah to Peter to John (who considered himself the apostle whom Jesus loved) all who had a first hand experience with the glory of God had hearts full of fear.

When we have a God instilled fear, it can followed by God's gracious deliverance. It was God who comforted Isaiah, Peter, and John. It is by the grace of God that we come to recognize that, "**behold, the Lord will come with fire and with His chariots, like a whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. ¹⁶ For by fire and by His sword the Lord will judge all flesh; and the slain of the Lord shall be many**" (Isaiah 65:15, 16). It is also by grace that we come to faith in Christ which justifies us before God and grants us peace and deliverance from His wrath (Romans 5:1).

*How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believ'd!*

Some come to recognize quite early the precious nature of God's grace, for many of us God's grace becomes more precious with time.

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

We may consider the dangers, toils, and snares to be the difficulties of life and they well may be. But over and above all the difficulties God has faithfully seen us through to the seat in which we now sit, there is the continually invisible difficulty of persevering in the faith. The devil ever accuses (Revelation 12:10) and Jesus ever intercedes (Romans 8:34). It is the dangers and toils of losing faith that Christ safely brings us through.

*The Lord has promis'd good to me,
His word my hope secures;*

When we view our lives through the spectacles of God's word and promises, we recognize that even the most tragic event has a heavenly design. Consider the record of Moses regarding those who wandered in the wilderness.

And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you *and* test you, to know what *was* in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. ³ So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man

shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 8:2, 3).

*He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.*

The Lord is our shield and our portion. He shields us and feeds us. Our lives are insulated from the random acts of the wicked; whatever successes the wicked have in their assaults are only according to God's holy design. God ordained the successful, yet evil, efforts of Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery that He might save many people. We can be assured of God's hand as long as our lives endure.

Lord, how they have increased who trouble me! Many are they who rise up against me. ²Many are they who say of me, "There is no help for him in God." Selah ³But You, O Lord, are a shield for me, my glory and the One who lifts up my head. ⁴I cried to the Lord with my voice, and He heard me from His holy hill" (Psalm 3:1-4).

*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.*

This is clearly a reference to the veil in the tabernacle and temple which separated the Holy place from the Holy of Holies. At the crucifixion the veil was ripped from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51) – again, God opening access to Himself. The promise of eternity to the faithful is an eternity of joy and peace.

"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who call'd me here below,
Will be forever mine.*

This original ending is not unlike the ending we've grown accustomed to in the more popular versions of this hymn. The meaning is clear. As precious as this world and the things in this world may be to us, there is a temporary quality to history. But God has extended His Son and His word into history to call men to Himself. And those who hear and respond will be forever His.

Questions for Study

1. What are some things that worship should consist of (page 2)?
2. What is the role of the worship leaders (page 2, 3)?
3. Who wrote Amazing Grace and what was his occupation before he was a pastor (page 3)?
4. Define grace (page 4).
5. Explain the roles of faith and grace in our salvation (page 4).
6. What is a wretch and in what respect should we thinking of ourselves this way (page 4)?
7. Do we find God or does He find us (page 4)? Explain.
8. What happens when God grants sight (page 4)?
9. Why is it important to have a fear of God (pages 4, 5)?
10. What are some of the dangers God has seen you through (page 5)?
11. What might the good that God promises to His children look like at times (pages 5, 6)?
12. What does it mean to be within the veil (page 6)?
13. What are the limits of the importance of history versus eternity (page 6)?