

Amazing Grace | Ephesians 2:4-10 | September 18, 2016

Hymn Notes: Wikipedia (accessed 9/12/16)

“Amazing Grace” is a Christian hymn published in 1779, with words written by the English poet and clergyman John Newton (1725-1807). Newton grew up without any particular religious conviction, but his life’s path was formed by a variety of twists and coincidences that were often put into motion by his recalcitrant insubordination. He was pressed (conscripted) into service in the Royal Navy, and after leaving the service, he became involved in the Atlantic slave trade. In 1748, a violent storm battered his vessel off the coast of County Donegal, Ireland, so severely that he called out to God for mercy, a moment that marked his spiritual conversion.

Newton’s father was a shipping merchant who was brought up as a Catholic but had Protestant sympathies, and his mother was a devout Independent unaffiliated with the Anglican Church [Congregational?]. She had intended Newton to become a clergyman, but she died of tuberculosis when he was six years old. For the next few years, Newton was raised by his emotionally distant stepmother while his father was at sea, and spent some time at a boarding school where he was mistreated. At the age of eleven, he joined his father on a ship as an apprentice; his seagoing career would be marked by headstrong disobedience.

While aboard the ship, *Greyhound*, Newton gained notoriety for being one of the most profane men the captain had ever met. In a culture where sailors commonly used oaths and swore, Newton was admonished several times for not only using the worst words the captain had ever heard, but creating new ones to exceed the limits of verbal debauchery. In March 1748, while the *Greyhound* was in the North Atlantic, a violent storm came upon the ship that was so rough it swept overboard a crew member who was standing where Newton had been moments before. After hours of the crew emptying water from the ship and expecting to be capsized, Newton and another mate tied themselves to the ship’s pump to keep from being washed overboard, working for several hours. After proposing the measure to the captain, Newton had turned and said, “If this will not do, then Lord have mercy upon us!” Newton rested briefly before returning to the deck to steer for the next eleven hours. During his time at the wheel he pondered his divine challenge.

About two weeks later, the battered ship and starving crew landed in Lough Swilly, Ireland. For several weeks before the storm, Newton had been reading *The Christian’s Pattern*, a summary of the 15th century, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis. The memory of his own “Lord have mercy upon us!” uttered during a moment of desperation in the storm did not leave him; he began to ask if he was worthy of God’s mercy or in any way redeemable as he had not only neglected his faith but directly opposed it, mocking others who showed theirs, deriding and denouncing God as a myth. He came to believe that God had sent him a profound message and had begun to work through him.

Newton’s conversion was not immediate, but he contacted Polly’s family [long time sweet heart] and announced his intentions to marry her. Her parents were hesitant as he was known to be unreliable and impetuous. They knew he was profane, but they allowed him to write to Polly, and he set to begin to submit to authority for her sake... Newton continued in the slave trade through several voyages where he sailed up rivers in Africa – now as a captain – procured slaves being offered for sale in larger ports, and subsequently transported them to North America. In between voyages, he married Polly in 1750 and he found it more difficult to leave her at the beginning of each trip. After three shipping experiences in the slave trade, Newton was promised a position as ship’s captain with cargo unrelated to slavery when, at the age of thirty, he collapsed and never sailed again.

He and Polly immersed themselves in the church community, and Newton's passion was so impressive that his friends suggested he become a priest in the Church of England. He was turned down by John Gilbert, Archbishop of York, in 1758, ostensibly for having no university degree, although the more likely reasons were his leanings toward evangelism and tendency to socialize with Methodists. Newton continued his devotions, and after being encouraged by a friend, he wrote about his experiences in the slave trade and his conversion. George Legge, 3rd Earl of Dartmouth, impressed with his story, sponsored Newton for ordination by John Green, Bishop of Lincoln, and offered him the curacy of Olney, Buckinghamshire, in 1764. Olney was a village of about 2,500 residents whose main industry was making lace by hand. The people were mostly illiterate and many of them were poor. Newton's preaching was unique in that he shared many of his own experiences from the pulpit; many clergy preached from a distance, not admitting any intimacy with temptation or sin. He was involved in his parishioners' lives and was much loved, although his writing and delivery were sometimes unpolished.

Newton struck a friendship with William Cowper, a gifted writer who had failed at a career in law and suffered bouts of insanity, attempting suicide several times. Cowper enjoyed Olney – and Newton's company; he was also new to Olney and had gone through a spiritual conversion similar to Newton's. Together, their effect on the local congregation was impressive. In 1768, they found it necessary to start a weekly prayer meeting to meet the needs of an increasing number of parishioners. They also began writing lessons for children.

Newton and Cowper attempted to present a poem or hymn for each prayer meeting. The lyrics to "Amazing Grace" were written in late 1772 and probably used in a prayer meeting for the first time on January 1, 1773. A collection of the poems Newton and Cowper had written for use in services at Olney was bound and published anonymously in 1779 under the title *Olney Hymns*. Newton contributed 280 of the 348 texts in *Olney Hymns*; "1 Chronicles 17:16-17, Faith's Review and Expectation" was the title of the poem with the first line "Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)".

Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and said, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? And this was a small thing in your eyes, O God. You have also spoken of your servant's house for a great while to come, and have shown me future generations, O Lord God! 1 Chronicles 17:16-17

When originally used in Olney, it is unknown what music, if any, accompanied the verses written by John Newton. Contemporary hymnbooks did not contain music and were simply small books of religious poetry. The first known instance of Newton's lines joined to music was *A Companion to the Countess of Huntingdon's Hymns* (London, 1808), where it is set to the tune "Hephzibah" by English composer John Jenkins Husband. Common meter hymns were interchangeable with a variety of tunes; more than twenty musical settings of "Amazing Grace" circulated with varying popularity until 1835 when William Walker assigned Newton's words to a traditional song named "New Britain", which was itself an amalgamation of two melodies ("Gallaher" and "St. Mary") first published in the *Columbian Harmony* by Charles H. Spilman and Benjamin Shaw (Cincinnati, 1829). Spilman and Shaw, both students at Kentucky's Centre College, compiled their tune book both for public worship and revivals, to satisfy "the wants of the Church in her triumphal march."

"Amazing Grace", with the words written by Newton and joined with "New Britain", the melody most currently associated with it, appeared for the first time in Walker's shape note tune book *Southern Harmony* in 1847. It was, according to author Steve Turner, a "marriage made in heaven... The music behind 'amazing' had a sense of awe to it. The music behind 'grace' sounded graceful. There was a rise at the point of confession, as though the author was stepping out into the open and making a bold declaration, but a corresponding fall when admitting

his blindness.” Walker’s collection was enormously popular, selling about 600,000 copies all over the U.S. when the total population was just over 20 million.

Grace = *charis*

TDNT, Vol. IX

Classical Literature: The basis of the usage of ***charis*** is what delights... The development in later antiquity, which is important for the NT, is along two lines. ***Charis*** is a fixed term for demonstrations of a ruler’s favour... The second development is that ***charis*** becomes power in a substantial sense. Naturally a “power” dwells in ***charis*** from the outset and this is a supernatural power, that of love. 375-376

Old Testament: In the OT the word [grace] achieves its distinctive sense in its relation to Yahweh. It is particularly adapted to denote what takes place in the covenant between Yahweh and Israel... In (Ex. 20:5b-6 “*I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*”) the inner tension that comes to resolution in the story of the covenant people of the OT before God may be seen in the combination of two statements about Yahweh: Yahweh, who turns to His people in the covenant, is also the One who is jealous for His rights. The [grace] statement is one of those that express Yahweh’s covenant grace to His people. Thus Yahweh is predicated as the God “who shows covenant grace to thousands of generations of those that love me and keep my commandments.” ...The full life of the believer and suppliant in face of the divine [grace] is then developed especially in the Psalms... We find that “thy covenant grace is better than life” Ps. 63:3. This shows how fully Israel’s faith is in the last analysis set on the turning of Yahweh expressed in [grace]... In conclusion it must be stated that the content of [grace] is decisively controlled by the nature of the social relationship to which it refers. 383-386

New Testament: In Paul ***charis*** is a central concept that most clearly expresses his understanding of the salvation event... Specifically Pauline is the use of the word to expound the structure of the salvation event. The linguistic starting-point is the sense of “making glad by gifts,” of showing free unmerited grace. The element of freedom in giving is constitutive, ***dorean*** [freely], Rom 3:24 f.; cf. 4:1 ff.; 5:15, 17). Paul orientates himself, not to the question of the nature of God, but to the historical manifestation of salvation in Christ. He does not speak of the gracious God; he speaks of the grace that is actualized in the cross of Christ (Gl 2:21, cf. vv. 15-20) and that is an actual event in proclamation. If God’s favour is identical with the crucifixion, then its absoluteness is established. We are saved by grace alone. [Footnote #180: Grace does not support man’s striving for the good. It makes the effort to stand on one’s own futile. An aspect of grace is its newness. It is not tied to any human presupposition, but negates all human preparation. It is the instantaneous new creation of the recipient of the message of grace.] Grace is shown to the sinner, Rom 3:23 f.; 5:10, cf. Gl 2:17-21; Rom 11:32. It is the totality of salvation, 2 Cor 6:1... The power of grace is displayed in its work, the overcoming of sin, Rom 5:20 f. The understanding of its superiority is not quantitative, but qualitative and structural. 394-395

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The NT employs the term ***charis*** 155 times, mostly in the Pauline letters (100 times) especially in 1 and 2 Cor. (10 and 18 times), Rom. (24 times) and Eph. (12 times)... For Paul ***charis*** is the essence of God’s decisive saving act in Jesus Christ, which took place in his sacrificial death, and also of all its consequences in the present and future (Rom. 3:24 ff.). Therefore, the use of ***charis*** at the beginning and end of the Pauline letters is much more than a mere polite cliché. “Grace” is not just a good wish for salvation; it is qualified as the grace of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 13:13, where it is linked with the name of Jesus). 118-19