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Hymns of the Faith: "Amazing Grace!"

1 Chronicles 17:17

By Dr. Bill Wymond

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with
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Bill Wymond

Dr. Wymond: Good morning! This is "Hymns of the Faith", brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for "Hymns of the Faith." And now here with "Hymns of the Faith" is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan and we're here with Derek Thomas this morning. We're delighted to be together to talk about hymns of the faith. It's a time for us to review some of the greatest songs of the Christian church, written over the last 2,000 years that have been, for the people of God, a tremendous expression of their faith in God, what they believe about God, what they believe that God has done for them in Christ Jesus.

Today we are looking at one of the best known hymns in all of the English language and usually rated in the top five as to the favorite hymns of people in the English speaking world. And it's–I hardly have to the say the name–it's the hymn *Amazing Grace*. It was written by John Newton who was an evangelical Anglican cleric, a pastor in the late 1700's, the late 18th century and the early 19th century, the early 1800's. His own biography is an amazing story, and I'm going to ask Derek to tell us about it.

Very often at the beginning of this program, I ask Bill Wymond to play the song or the tune of the hymn that we are about to study, but I'm not going to ask him to do it this time because you know how *Amazing Grace* goes. A lot of times in these hymns, it's helpful for us to hear it before we begin to talk about it so that you are familiar. But right now my guess is 97% of you have that tune playing in your mind. It's been used in countless movies. It's sung very often at funerals and at other special occasions. The text itself is almost autobiographical in some ways, Derek. And I think what I'd like to do is ask you to tell us about this extraordinary man, John Newton.

Dr. Thomas: Oh, yes. This is one of the great romance stories, in one sense. It was just a beautiful, beautiful story; and many of us, of course, have seen

recently the movie of William Wilberforce in which there wasn't a great portrayal of John Newton , I didn't think. He came across rather cranky and odd in the movie, I thought. John Newton, of course, is associated with the slave trade in England, having as a boy been raised by a fairly godly mother. But his father was involved in the slave trade. As a young boy, John Newton went as a kind of apprentice with his father and eventually became a captain of his own slave ship that would sail to the west coast of Africa. It was also, of course, a merchant ship; and there is the story of the journey back home in which he's caught in a storm. The ship is loaded with all kinds of cargo, and in particular beeswax, which probably saved his life in God's providence. The story of how water is coming into the ship, and he is convicted that this may well be the end of his life. What keeps the ship afloat is the beeswax, and eventually he makes it through the storm. He was a voracious reader. He was a very intelligent boy–had taught himself some classics in Latin as a young boy and began reading, as so many did, Thomas A. Kempis' book *Imitation of Christ* and is eventually converted. *Amazing Grace* would be biographical of his conversion, a Damascus road, Paul-like story of blindness to light and sight. And from being a slave of sin to being free in Christ, and it was very dramatic. John Newton, of course, was in the Church of England and remained in the Church of England in Olney which you can still visit. It has a marvelous little museum there of John Newton memorabilia.

We also remember John Newton because of his extraordinary friendship with William Cowper, the man who wrote *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*, one of the greatest poets of his age in Britain. And Cowper was a melancholy figure, suffered from probably–a diagnosis today would be very different from the diagnosis given then. But he attempted to take his life on several occasions, and it was his spiritual relationship with John Newton as his friend and mentor that kept (I think) William Cowper sane. God using two extraordinary figures and very different figures temperamentally, I think, in the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Dr. Duncan: Newton's tombstone (or the plaque) to him on the wall of St. Mary Woolnoth is beautiful. John Newton Clerk–it looks like "clerk" to an American (C-l-e-r-k), but pronounced in Britain "Clark," meaning *cleric*, someone who is the pastoral ministry in one of the churches.

John Newton Clerk
once an infidel and libertine,
a servant of slaves in Africa,
was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,
preserved, restored, pardoned,
and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.

It was said that in his old age, around the age of 82, that he once said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and

that Christ is a great Savior.” Those are two good things to remember when one's memory is almost gone. An amazing man, you've already mentioned his connection with Wilberforce.

We live in a day and age, Derek, where there are people saying that in order for Christianity to express the kind of social conscience that we need to have in our day and age, in our cultural moment, that we need to abandon the doctrine of justification by faith. But it was precisely that doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone that fired the energies of a whole group of godly evangelicals to work for the abolition first of the slave trade in the British empire and then of slavery period.

It's been said–You know historians are a cynical lot. They’re always looking for an ulterior motive or a deeper motive for an act like this. But it has been said that the British Empire's abolition of the slave trade and of slavery is a singular event in the cultural history of the world in terms of an empire acting absolutely against its own economic interest for only a moral principle which is at stake. And historians have been able to find–They have searched in vain for some sort of ulterior motive for the British Parliament to do what it did when it finally abolished the slave trade and slavery which was a lucrative thing for the British Empire. The British Empire was so far flung, there was a tremendous need for manpower and for work force; so the story of Newton and Wilberforce and that generation of folks–I mean it went on, Derek, for what 30, 40 years–This battle went on for the abolition of the slave trade and then of slavery. And Newton was a key component in that. He was a spiritual influence on William Wilberforce who really took the lead in the Parliament. It was an amazing time.

Dr. Thomas: Well, it's also an interesting (and maybe a little controversial) that Newton, in his 50's, moved to London, which is where this tombstone is–at St. Mary Woolnoth in London–and he comes into contact with William Wilberforce, a member of Parliament. He is hugely influential in ensuring that Wilberforce not enter the ministry but be a social reformer as a politician. That in itself is a marvelous lesson about utilizing gifts to the glory of God in the secular world of politics. But it's the way John Newton, as a minister, advises, encourages, and not a little influences Wilberforce in what is a secular issue in some ways–the abolition of slavery. But it was something in which he was deeply, deeply involved in. And not just out of remorse and guilt, although there was plenty of that that he writes about, but out of a desire to see godly principles of morals, ethics enacted within the secular state. And I think we still have to learn that and how to go about doing that in our own day and age.

Dr. Wymond: Yes, I wanted to say something and even ask a question. I think this whole phenomenon of his being at this church, Olney, which was a small parish for the 14 or 15 years or whenever he was there; and the hymn writing is a particularly interesting thing because at the time in the Church of England they were more actually singing the psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins. And so he

brings in these hymns for his prayer meeting illustrations, and they are wonderful. He with Cowper wrote a hymnal, a whole hymnal's worth. He wrote about 280, and I think Cowper wrote 68. And they are wonderful hymns.

Another one amongst them is *Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken,* and one of Derek's favorites, I think, is *How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds*. There was a marvelous literary production here. And to think that they did this for a small church–that this great talent was concentrated on a very small congregation–says something to me about the importance of being sure that the small congregations have preaching and teaching and worship that is just as well thought-through and planned as for the biggest church.

And also I think in this context the fact that he was writing these hymns to illustrate particular points so that *Amazing Grace!*, I read, was written to help comment on his preaching from 1 Chronicles, the 17th chapter, the 17th verse–and so on like that. So while he was giving a testimony hymn, it actually was used to illustrate something that was happening in that particular preaching.

Dr. Duncan: Bill, I'm looking at the bottom of the page of the hymnal where it indicates the origin of the tune. And it tells me that *Amazing Grace*, the tune to which most of us have always sung this hymn, is a traditional American melody. Derek or Bill, was this song sung to other tunes more commonly in Britain for a period of time? Derek, your shaking your head “yes.” I'm not sure I've ever heard it to another tune than this one, Bill.

Dr. Wymond: Well, I'm not sure what they did in Britain. Derek would have to speak about that. But this tune's origin is somewhere lost in the ether, but it was found in an earlier book before it was applied to this set of words but has always, pretty much, been married to this set of words. And it's just thought to have appeared in the culture somewhere in early America.

What fascinates me about the particular tune is that it seems to me to have Scots or Irish origins. It just sounds as though it could have come from either one of those countries. When you play it through, which I shall do, think about that. You can hear an Irish or a Scots accent:

[Dr. Wymond plays tune.]

I think that a lot of our early American tunes actually have their roots in Ireland and in Scotland. Another thing that fascinates me about this tune is how little there really is to it as far as variety of notes. It's mainly fourths and thirds.

[Dr. Wymond plays note.]

There is a fourth right there, which I call a “happy leap.”

[Dr. Wymond continues playing notes.]

Then thirds, a few passing tones, then the same thing over again. Here's another fourth and then a third and a succession of thirds. Excuse me. Then the fourth. Not much to that tune.

Dr. Duncan: The “da da da” that just repeats several times in the song does give the impression of an Irish or a Scottish origin to it. I don't think I'd ever thought of that before, but that definitely–that sort of trill effect that's repeated on what, four occasions at least–maybe more than that–five occasions–in this very short, common-meter tune, has that kind of nature-effect that you hear frequently in the folk songs of Scotland or Ireland.

Dr. Wymond: Makes you think of a bagpipe.

Dr. Duncan: It does.

Dr. Wymond: Although I confess to you I do not like to hear this on a bagpipe, because the drone which always is sounding below sometimes interferes with the harmonies that our ears want to hear. Isn't it interesting how this hymn has become almost a ritual hymn for any observance of tragedy here in the United States? And they always sing the words, but I think, “Does anybody really…

Dr. Duncan: …hear the words at all?” It's so true.

Dr. Wymond: It's okay with me though, because they are saying the truth.

Dr. Duncan: It's probably good for us to go ahead and note right now, even as we are thinking of the tune and having just heard it played–now it's definitely working around in your head and your heart as we talk–that the last stanza, and I think that last stanza is one reason people like to sing it at funerals, was not written by Newton. We don't know, I think, where that last stanza came from.

“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've first begun.”

We know that it occurred in a collection of sacred ballads as early as 1790; so it was from the time of Newton, but Newton himself wrote the first five stanzas of the hymn. And you’ll find in that what Derek was saying–a biographical account of his conversion and, as Dr. Wymond was reminding us, it's also connected to this exposition of 1 Chronicles 17 that would have been going on in the Wednesday prayer meeting.

But just walking through the stanzas of the hymn…First you see an acknowledgement of sin. “Amazing grace!–how sweet the sound–that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, and now I see.”

And so the first stanza acknowledges both the state of sin in which Newton and every sinner finds himself and secondly the need for conversion and the work of conversion. And the combination of that, the state of sin and God's gracious work of conversion, leads him to open with this exclamation “Amazing grace!–how sweet the sound.” So there is an excitement; there's a surprise at the converting grace of God in the life of a profligate sinner here.

And I might add that there's a very famous minister, recently retired but still alive and well known and well loved by many in the United States, who mightily protests at our using terminology for us like “a wretch,” and everywhere in hymnody that he had the opportunity to make changes, his congregation would remove statements like this. He once upon a time made a statement that went something like this: “Well, John Newton was a wretch, but I'm not.” Well, I think that quite misses the point of the Bible's teaching on sin. Yes, not all of us do some of the horrific outlandish dastardly things that John Newton did at one point in his life, but all of us, in the eyes of God, are sinners. And we are estranged from him. And I think, as you were saying Bill, this hymn in its text really drives that point home. And I do, with you, wonder what people are thinking when they sing these words at great national occasions or at other occasions when you have a lot of people who probably don't believe the theology of the hymn singing it.

But the second stanza goes on to say, “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;” And that, Derek, kind of picks up on a theme from the psalms–that it's precisely God's mercy that teaches us to fear God. And that's kind of a surprising theological idea. You might think that it's God's justice and judgment that teaches you to fear God, but at one point at least the psalmist confesses that it's precisely the fact that God is a merciful God that teaches him to fear God. So you find echoes of rich deep biblical theology throughout this song, and I think that's a particularly helpful truth that he highlights there.

The third stanza goes on to say, “Thro’ many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; ‘tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.” And so it's an acknowledgement of God's providence in his life, and probably thinking of both before and after his conversion in light of the biography that you have shared with us.

And then the fourth stanza, “The Lord has promised good to me, his Word my hope secures; he will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures.” And so there is an acknowledgement of God's ongoing watch-care and loving providence over us.

And then his final stanza, “And when this flesh and heart shall fail, and mortal life shall cease, I shall possess within the veil a life of joy and peace.” And I'm sure again that that stanza is another reason why people like to sing this song at funeral times. But clearly again there is a profession of his living hope in the living

God that even in his dying hour he will be alive with Christ, possessing within the veil a life of joy and peace. Really excellent words getting to heart issues of the gospel, expressing deep trust in the living God and thanksgiving to him for conversion and for loving watch-care and providence and walking with us all the days of our lives. One stanza that I sort of jumped over a significant phrase is the second stanza which ends, “how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.” And I think that almost every believer holds very precious that first dawning of the realization of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ– whether they have a dramatic conversion or not, you know.

Derek, I know that for you with a very and definite a dramatic conversion to Christ, it's very precious to you to remember the awakening of God and his grace in your life. But even for me, growing up in a Christian home, when the forgiving love of God to me in Jesus Christ first began to dawn on me in something like the fullness that is obtained over the years, it was a very very precious thing that believers treasure up and store.

Dr. Thomas: I love these two words “amazing grace.” There's a book of course that we often cite now, *Putting the Amazing Back into Grace*. Grace, of course, from Paul's words in Ephesians 2 “by grace you are saved through faith and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast.”

Grace, meaning unmerited favor, and to the natural man grace is always surprising. We don't expect God to be gracious, because we're not that way ourselves. And our predilection is to make God after our own image. Yes, for me I can't sing this hymn without actually thinking of a day in 1971 when, in God's providence, many other things had become dark including my family and a divorce in my parents and just life generally being miserable. And then on top of that, conviction of sin that came so suddenly that within a matter of days, I'd gone from not believing in hell to fearing that if I died I would go to hell. So amazing grace is a testimony of God's goodness.

Dr. Duncan: Let's hear the hymn then, Derek.

[Soloist sings:]

> Amazing grace!–how sweet the sound–
> that saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost, but now I 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!

Thro' many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'tis grace has 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.

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.

Dr. Wymond: Dr. Duncan, that was Ben Roberson singing *Amazing Grace*.