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What’s So Amazing About Grace?

Ephesians 2:8: (NASB) *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;*

Grace...even speaking the word seems to give a sense of calm. It is almost as though the word itself emits a fresh and breathable air that clears away the stuffiness of a confused life. Grace can have lots of different meanings, from something that comes with elegance, to a powerful heavenly gift. So, what is grace and more specifically, what is God’s grace? How does it work? Who gets it bestowed upon them? Can grace change your life? What is so amazing about grace?

The grace of God is unmerited favor. To illustrate the amazing grace of God, we are looking at several scriptural examples of God’s grace and also the life of John Newton. John Newton was a slave ship captain turned devout Christian. He began working on slave ships at the age of seventeen and became a slave ship captain. Newton wrote the hymn, *Amazing Grace*, probably one of the best known, most respected, most sung and recognized Christian hymns in the entire world. He was a vile man early in his life and called himself a “wretch” and “The Great Blasphemer.” He began the conversion process of his life from wretch to lover of God, to servant of God, to dedicated force for God. His story is one of amazing grace. This next audio clip is a recreation of John Newton speaking to his congregation (he became a pastor) on January 1, 1773, based on the following text: 1 Chronicles 17:16: John Newton took this Scripture and basically applied it to himself. “Who am I and why have you brought me this far

 I was a wretch, *The Story Behind the Song, Asbury University*

- *And he said to his congregation on that Friday morning, first of January, 1773, “The Lord gives us many blessings, but unless we are grateful for these, we lose much of the comfort from them.” So he said, “Well never mind, David, now what about you and me? When you look back, where were you when the Lord found you?” And for himself, he says, “I was a wretch.”*

He quoted the first line of his hymn, “amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...” He wrote that from personal experience and spent his life preaching that as well. He stated that unless we are grateful for our blessings, we lose much comfort from them. It is wonderful to have blessings but unless we are grateful continually, the comfort from those blessings becomes idle and useless.

GOD’S GRACE AND THE SINNER WHO SEEKS REDEMPTION: Ephesians 2:1-3

 The great blasphemer, *The Story Behind the Song, Asbury University*

- *He loved to learn from his mother, and he could recite passages of Scripture and all of Isaac Watts’ hymns, but when his mother died, his father was away at sea for a year. When he came back, he married quite quickly to a young Italian lady and they went to live in Essex. They had a child and Newton really got pushed aside. As a crew member on several slave ships, he helped scour the African coast in search of human cargo. Even the young Newton was thrown into chains once, forced to work as a slave himself on a small island off the coast of Sierra Leone. Eventually released from his captivity after about a year, the great blasphemer, as he called himself, went to a life so depraved that even his rough shipmates found it shocking.*

When talking about the subject of amazing grace, you can’t help but talk about the life of John Newton and the amazing life he led before his conversion to Christ. Newton was a young Christian boy growing up. By the time he was seventeen he worked on slave ships and then became a slave himself. He called himself “The Great Blasphemer.” He lived such a horrific life that even his shipmates were shocked at the degradation with which this man would live his life. How does God’s amazing grace work in his life and how does it work in ours?

Ephesians 2:4-10: Mercy is undeserved compassion bestowed upon someone who deserves a negative consequence and thereby mercy brings relief of pain, suffering or misery. God’s grace is shown here as a result of God being rich in mercy. He is rich in mercy because of His love. Grace can’t happen without mercy, which can’t happen without love. **Please refer to our June 2, 2013 Christian Questions program, “What Does it Mean to be Merciful?”** Grace is undeserved favor. It is a gift. You cannot earn God’s grace and without Jesus it would not happen. He had to pay the price. Grace is a part of mercy and God’s love. Our work doesn’t earn grace for us, but God counts our efforts. The works of John Newton’s early life ranged from dark and evil to a feeble reaching toward God.

GOD’S GRACE AND THE JEWISH NATION: Romans 11:1-6: Is God’s grace limited to those of Israel who accept Jesus now in this life? No! God’s grace is BIGGER than that!



))) The storm and the great turning, *The Story Behind the Song, Asbury University*

- *Finally on March 21st, 1748, Newton experienced what he would call his "Great Turning Day." In the middle of the night, the 22 year-old was awakened by a violent storm. Cries from his crewmates on deck sounded the alarm. Their ship, The Greyhound, was about to sink. As Newton scrambled up the ladder to the deck, the man directly above him was hit by a wave, swept overboard, and never seen again. Finally making it to the wheel, The Great Blasphemer raised his voice, not to curse God, but to pray. In words he had not used for many years, John Newton pleaded: Lord have mercy on us. Hour after hour, sustained only by his call upon God's mercy, Newton attempted to steer the battered ship through the violent seas, as down below the crew sought desperately to stop the holes with bedding and strips of clothing.*

Newton was crying out to God to have mercy on him. Israel too will have a great turning day! **The nation of Israel will be a recipient of God's grace at a future time: Romans 11:11-16:** God's mercy and grace - both based on a plan founded upon justice and unbreakable promises! When God makes a promise, He doesn't break it!

))) Answered Prayer, *The Story Behind the Song, Asbury University*

- *For 11 hours as the storm raged, Newton remained at the ship's wheel, not knowing if he would live or die. Gradually the winds lessened and the storm began to calm. Newton's desperate prayer for God's mercy had been answered. For the rest of his life, Newton would mark each March 21st with the day of humiliation, prayer and praise for his great deliverance from the sea and of the life of sin he had been living. Newton's dramatic conversion set him on a long winding path that would take him towards a new life. Not in one great leap, but step by step.*

Newton found God in this night of terror. It was a step-by-step process. This seems to be the method of God's grace: Step by step...this is how God's grace works in our lives. There is not this big miraculous conversion and everything is great. God's grace enters into your life and now instead of having hope in God, you can begin to have faith in God. **GOD'S GRACE (THROUGH JESUS) TO THE APOSTLE PAUL: 1 Corinthians 15:3-11:** Paul is here humbly showing the progression of God's grace. Notice the similarity to John Newton, who was a slave driver, and the Apostle Paul who was a persecutor of Christians. Paul established his most humble and out of step beginnings as a reminder that while where we were does have some importance, it can never overshadow where the grace of God has brought us or is bringing us. It is a step-by-step process.

))) Small steps, *The Story Behind the Song, Asbury University*

- *It was through this experience at sea and his prayer crying for mercy that Newton's life began to be completely transformed. It wasn't a sudden overnight change, although some things happened immediately. He stopped blaspheming, he didn't swear again, and he began to read the Bible. But looking back later in life on this experience, he said, "Surely, if I had any light then, it was as the first faint streak of dawn."*

What a telling statement from a mature Christian later in life looking back on his earlier life! If you look at the great dramatic conversion, you say, "that's the moment," but John Newton himself says it was the first of *many* moments of God's grace growing in his life. Let us remember that the great service of the Apostle Paul was not achieved at his conversion. Several years passed before he even went out to preach. His great service was as a result of consistently living a grace-filled life! **2 Corinthians 12:7-10:** Paul was already strong in the Lord yet undergoing hardship so he prayed, but Jesus said NO! Was Paul crushed? No, rather he was made stronger because he understood the transforming power of grace in our everyday existence.

Note the parallel between the life of John Newton and the Apostle Paul. Both understood that they had to grow up in Christ. They needed to grow in living a life of grace. Grace is that unmerited favor. John Newton knew he could not earn the opportunity of God's favor, but it was given to him despite the wretchedness of his life. Newton is best known for his hymn "Amazing Grace," but his life was much bigger than writing the hymn. **Philippians 4:13:** God's grace is transformative!

))) Growing in Christ, *The Story Behind the Song, Asbury University*

- *Captain Newton came home from the sea to stay in 1754. He was 29, and it would be 18 years before he wrote his most famous of hymns. During this time he grew in faith and knowledge as he learned both Hebrew and Greek. He also became friends with prominent preachers of the day, among them George Whitfield and John Wesley. Church leaders in the area gradually heard about Newton's amazing story and invited him to speak. The idea that Newton might have a higher calling was why he decided to apply for formal ordination.*



He had that amazing conversion at age twenty-two, but he did not quit the slave ships. Record has it that his treatment of the slaves dramatically changed, but he was still running slaves. You see the small steps that happened in his life to transform him to what he was going to become. Just because he had his conversion and the grace of God beginning to work in him did not mean God was finished with him. He was only starting. We are an unfinished work. "Never judge an artist by his unfinished work." This is a good reason why we should not judge others. **GOD'S GRACE AND OUR PRAYERS:** Hebrews 4:14-16: Jesus is our inspiration. He understands us. "The throne of grace" is the throne of unmerited favor! Prayer is grace because through justice being satisfied by the sacrifice of Jesus, we now have a method through which we may approach God! Why did God through Jesus satisfy justice? Because He loves us! Grace in the context of the rest of the character of God is an incomprehensible thing! Is God's grace so strong in our life that we are ever looking at how we can better serve Him?

 **Early life published, *The Story Behind the Song*, Asbury University**

- *His authentic narrative that lead us about his experience up until that point was published, and what is very interesting coming back to that this theme of slave trading is that this book was so popular. It went through many editions and it was translated into French, German and Dutch. So, it went around the world but nobody ever questioned the slave trading issue because at that stage nobody was questioning it anyway.*

How do we position ourselves to maximize the grace privilege of prayer? **This is the last night before Jesus was crucified:** John 15:12-17: (NASB) First: Do what Jesus says by doing what he did! He never said anything that he did not do himself. This is an example of a true leader. Second: Live in an elevated state, for it is here that we can hear the will of God. We are no longer servants, but now we are friends. Third: Live a transformed life in His service, and then when you ask, grace will abound! Here is where Paul mentions our prayer life. You don't find the expectations of grace fulfilled unless the life of grace is lived. **Now, live transformed in the face of the world, the flesh and the devil:** Romans 8:12-17: God's grace abounds when we put ourselves in the right place. Psalms 27:14: Sometimes God's grace doesn't come when we look for it or expect it. If we are in a position to want it by the way we're living, then we can see it. God's timing is always right.


GOD'S GRACE AND THE UNBELIEVING WORLD OF MANKIND: What if the call of the true church was there, in a worldwide sense, to help abolish slavery from sin and death just as John Newton did? The Apostle Paul said the world is waiting eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. Mankind wants to be released from that slavery and misery of sin and death so they can have a piece of God's grace. The world of mankind is waiting for the revealing of the sons of God, and the world will have their turn at experiencing the magnanimous grace of God. It was by assuming the disgrace of the cross that Jesus assumed the sin of mankind and brought the grace of God to the forefront for all the world of mankind. Romans 8:18-22:

This IS a grand piece of the grand plan of the grace of God! Romans 5:12-14 **Adam was entirely responsible for inherited human sin. Death reigned even before the Law was given - therefore the penalty was clearly upon all humanity:** Romans 5:15-17: (NASB) ¹⁵*But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, (the many MUST mean all humanity according to the above context) much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. (This MUST mean the same "many")* ¹⁶*The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification.* ¹⁷*For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, (Again, who did death reign over? Everyone!) much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. (Aha! There IS a qualifier here applying to the called out ones! Shows a reign for them - an authority that they are given.)*

Romans 5:18-21: (NASB) ¹⁸*So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. (Okay - no qualifier - all humanity MUST be included)* ¹⁹*For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. (Again, this is about ALL humanity)* ²⁰*The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,* ²¹*so*



that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Grace replaces sin on a wholesale scale!) That is underserved favor! This favor goes to everyone. Why? Jesus cancelled the sin of Adam. Adam plunges the world into sin and death and Jesus lifts the world out of it. Justice is a major part of the grace of God. You have to have justice in order to have true grace. Justice now gives opportunity for mercy to work. Mercy works because love is there. Love is there and opens the door for grace. They all work together. Imagine that being applied to the whole world. That is grace!

 **Victory and death, *The story behind the song, Asbury University***

- As Newton approached death, his eyesight and memory began failing. One by one, those who had loved him came to say their goodbyes. To one of his close friends, William Jay, Newton made his now famous declaration, "My memory is now nearly gone but I remember two things. That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior." He died in 1807 at the age of 82, nine months after witnessing the answer to many prayers - the successful passage of the Act for the abolition of the slave trade.

GOD'S GRACE AS A LINK IN THE GREAT PLAN OF REDEMPTION AND LIFE! Grace then, is but one link in the glorious plan of God! So, how do all the elements we have talked about fit together...Justice, Love, Mercy and Grace? Love is the foundation of creation for it is the driving force that endows all that is created with an unmistakable harmony of purpose. Love gave birth to communication, adoration and the sacred music of discipleship. Love needs Justice to flourish... God is Love. Love has to have Justice in place to work. Justice is driven by Love. It is the evenhanded consequence bestowed upon someone based upon righteous treatment in response to their actions, words and motivations and thereby brings equity and balance. Justice holds to Mercy to anchor its force... Justice is driven by love. Love is its basis. Mercy would not exist but for Justice. Mercy is undeserved compassion bestowed upon someone who deserves a negative consequence and Mercy thereby brings relief of pain, suffering or misery. Mercy seeks Grace to multiply its reach... Grace is born out of Mercy. Grace is undeserved favor or standing bestowed upon someone who is not capable of earning such recognition and thereby brings previously unattainable opportunity. Grace is defined by Love...

A text with all four elements: Ephesians 2:4-7: (NASB) ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, (MERCY) because of His great love with which He loved us, (LOVE) ⁵even when we were dead in our transgressions, (JUSTICE) made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) (GRACE), ⁶and raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the surpassing riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. **The results of God's grace!** Isaiah 35:5-10: God's grace opens the door to eternity. It is available for every man, woman and child who ever lived. Revelation 21:3-4: Why will all these things pass away? Because of the amazing grace of God! God's great plan of redemption of life says that Adam sinned and Jesus died as a sacrifice for Adam's sin. Therefore, everyone subject to the sin of Adam is now subject to the grace of God through Jesus' sacrifice. We see grace as an unfolding force in our lives.

John Newton started hoping for God's grace. He began looking and praying for God's grace, which led him to the point of having faith. He went to the point of living a life of God's grace and being transformed. And then he went to the point of becoming a force for God's grace in others. That is the pathway of God's grace in our lives.

*So, what's so amazing about grace?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*