

AMAZING GRACE: AN UNDESERVED GIFT

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

February 26, 2023 – Lent 1

TEXT: Ephesians 2:1-10

Sermon to begin with a 2 ½ minute video, “What is grace?” - <https://youtu.be/ph1Aai8rSWA>

What is grace? How would you answer?

Throughout Lent, we are going to discover more about what grace is – the marvelous, amazing gift of God’s grace! And we will hear about people who have experienced God’s grace in a powerful way. And my prayer is that not only will we all be able to answer that question, “what is grace” but will grow in our faith and gratitude for the amazing, undeserved gift of God’s grace.

John Newton was definitely one who discovered amazing grace – and it changed him forever! Newton’s father was a naval captain and young John saw very little of him. His mother was the greatest influence on his life, teaching him Bible stories, singing hymns and praying for his salvation while he sat on her knee. But Newton’s world fell apart, when his mother died just before his 7th birthday. Newton fell into a life of wretchedness and sin. By the time he was 17, John was forced into the royal navy – where he rebelled against all authority. In his own words, John’s “delight and habitual practice was wickedness: and he “neither feared God nor regarded men”. Eventually he was dishonorably discharged – and eventually ended up in Africa where he was hired aboard a slave ship.

Newton hardened his heart to the trafficking of human beings and eventually he became the captain of his own slave ship. On May 10, 1748, however, his life was changed forever. His ship encountered a terrifying, violent storm. Just as it seemed that the ship would sink, Newton cried aloud, "Lord, have mercy upon us!" All the prayers, hymns and Bible verses he had learned those years before on his mother’s knee came flooding back to his mind. This was the beginning of Newton’s conversion to Jesus Christ.

In time, he left the slave trade and entered Christian ministry. Although he became a preacher of the gospel and wrote some 300 hymns – most of which are long since forgotten – but he is most remembered for his much-loved hymn "Amazing Grace."

“Amazing Grace” was conceived by Newton in December 1772 a part of his preparation he was making for a New Year’s Day sermon to his parishioners on January 1, 1773. The notion of writing a hymn for a sermon was really a brand-new idea in the 18th century. The church had chosen to only focus on the King James Bible and the 1662 book of Common Prayer – which were full of words and phrases that uneducated people found difficult to understand. So, Newton believed that he would help the people of his congregation understand the Scriptures if he wrote simply worded hymns that illustrated the passage on which he was preaching.

So, that New Year's Day, 1773, Newton chose as his sermon the topic of God's grace. He was in the habit of using every New Year's Day as a day to take stock of his own spiritual life – looking at where he had come from and who he was now. His sermon began with Newton emphasizing the importance of being grateful to God for His past mercies. Then he asked the same question that David had asked some 3,000 years ago, “Who am I, Lord?” His answer came in a testimony of God's amazing grace that saved a wretch like him.

He truly was amazed at God's grace in the salvation of sinners – especially to one the likes of him. In his own words, Newton said:

*When I get to heaven, I shall see three wonders there:
the first wonder will be to see many people there whom I did not
expect to see; the second wonder will be to miss many people whom I did expect to see;
and the third and greatest wonder
of all, will be to find myself there!”*

John Newton would always be grateful for God's mercy that reached out to him – a sinful, wretch – underserving and undesired....and changed him with God's amazing grace.

Newton would say: “*I am not the man I ought to be, I am not the man I wish to be and I am not the man I hope to be, but by the grace of God, I am not the man I used to be.*”

Amazing grace – how sweet the sound – that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now I'm found – was blind but now I see!

This year we celebrate the 250th anniversary of this great hymn. And our theme song for Lent will be “Amazing Grace” and we will see through the messages, each week, how people were changed by the of grace from Jesus in their lives.

The Apostle Paul was really one who was like a predecessor of John Newton. He definitely knew what it was like to be a slave to sin – blinded by his hatred for Jesus and His followers. He knew what it was like to be dead in his sin – but given life by the amazing grace of Jesus.

In our text for today, in the book of Ephesians, we read Paul's statement of faith – describing first what we like before salvation – how -we were lost in sin. Look at Ephesians 2:1-3:

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. ² You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. ³ All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else.

Yes, God does see all our faults and all our sins. He knows how imperfect we are. Romans 3:23 says that “*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*” We have all made mistakes and poor choices. We've all tried to do our own thing and forget about

God. We have gone our own way – and have lived a life apart from God – often following the ways of Satan.

And then we hear the two words that are some of my favorites in the Bible – and the Life Application Bible says that these may be the two most welcome words in all of Scripture. Look at verse 4:

⁴But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, ⁵that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) ⁶For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. ⁷So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus

⁸God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. ¹⁰For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

We have the incredible gift of eternal life, not because we deserve it...but because of the amazing love and grace of God, that reached out to us unworthy sinners. You see, God's desire to be in a relationship of unconditional love with us is entirely His idea and his initiative – not because we have somehow made ourselves spiritually deserving or “good enough”.

And truly, that is the best definition of grace – the underserved love of God. It is the love and forgiveness of God, given to us sinners who do not deserve it. Grace is what everybody needs, but nobody can possibly earn or deserve. Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do to make God love us less. Grace means that we are accepted by God!

We respond to this great gift of love by saying that we believe that Jesus came and died for our sins and has given us the gift of grace and eternal life. And the moment we believe and accept Jesus into our lives we are justified – made clean and right with God. And then we are given the Holy Spirit which helps us to grow in our faith.

We become Christians and receive the gift of eternal life, only by accepting this undeserved gift of God's grace – not by any great work or service we do.

You might remember the story of Heaven's Entrance Exam: A man died and went to heaven. Of course, St. Peter met him at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter said, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in." "Okay," the man said. "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart." "That's wonderful," said St. Peter. "That's worth three points!" "Three points?" said the man. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithes and service." "Terrific!" said St. Peter. "That's certainly

worth a point." "One point?!! Well, I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans." "Fantastic, that's good for two more points," said Peter. "Two points!" the man cried. "At this rate the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God." "Bingo, 100 points! Come on in."

You see you can't earn your way into heaven. It is not some reward we've been given – so no one can brag about all the good things they did – as if it was our own gifts that got us there". No – God saves us through His unconditional love – that saves all sinners. No matter who we are and no matter what we have done. God will never stop loving us and will continue to reach out to bring the lost home.

Chuck Swindoll says that one of the his greatest anticipations is that glorious day when we are in the place where there will be no boasting, no name dropping, no selfishness. And guess where it will be? Heaven. There will be no spiritual sounding testimonies that call attention to somebody super colossal achievements none of that. Everybody will have written across his or her life the word grace.

"How did you get here? "Grace!"
 "What made it possible?" "Grace!"
 "What's your name?" "Grace!"

There will be more graces up there than any other name. Everywhere grace, grace, grace!

In fact, we can imagine that over the door of heaven, could be a sign that says, "For sinners only" – no one is too bad to be saved. God wants to lavish His grace upon us – even when we don't deserve it. What an incredible, undeserved gift we've been given.

All we need to do is come with empty hands and admit our need of a Savior – and be filled up to overflowing with God's amazing grace.

You know, many of you have heard about our visits to Bethlehem in the past. There in the center of the town is the Church of the Nativity – one of the oldest churches in the Holy Land – built by Constantine in the year 330! And here's what's interesting – to get into the church, you have to enter by what is called the "Door of Humility." Literally, this door is only four feet tall. Only one person at a time can go through the door and you have to really stoop to get in. Everyone has to do it. You stoop down and suddenly you are in a big sanctuary with very tall ceilings and incredible columns and windows.

Now why in the world do they have this incredible building with such a tiny door to enter? Well, if you stand back and look, you can see that the entry way used to be a curved archway – actually big enough for a horse to go through. And that is what happened – looters and people in the Crusades used to ride into the church on their horses or camels – so they made the door only 4 foot high, so that wouldn't happen. So now – everyone – the rich and the powerful – the weak and the sinful – all would enter the church of the nativity the same way – literally stooping or bending the knee.

There is a message here! Pastor Ray Pritchard says this – “The message is this – you want to get to heaven? You have got to get off your high horse – you got to humble yourself and admit you’re a sinner. Once you admit you’re a sinner, you are an excellent candidate for heaven. You come to the cross with empty hands and ask for that wonderful gift of grace. It’s never too late - though your sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow.”

John Newton knew that incredible gift of forgiveness and he was always in awe of what God had done in his life. As he got older, and neared the end of his life, at the age of 82, he said, *“Although my memory’s fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior!”*

And then – Newton wrote his own epitaph – confessing who he was and the amazing grace of God that saved him: The words on his tombstone say: *“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. Near 16 years as Curate of this parish to 28 years as Rector of St. Mary Wadsworth.”*

That’s what the grace of God can do! That’s true conversion. That’s the amazing grace!

PRAYER

INVITATION

We're gonna stand up and sing now “come just as you are”, and as we do, I want to encourage you to look within your heart. Are you in need of the the changing power of God's Amazing Grace? One of the most amazing things about God's grace is that it's always available. If you realize that you are lost and need to be found or blind and you want to see clearly -- then God's grace is available to you. No matter who you are or where you're from or what you've done, God's grace is amazing and is there for you! Come now - come just as you are!

RESOURCES

“Amazing Grace.” November 7, 2005. *Our Daily Bread Devotional*.

David Fielding, *The Story Behind the Hymn: Amazing Grace*.

<https://castlefieldschurch.org.uk/the-story-behind-the-amazing-grace/>

Charles R. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*, Word Publishing, 1990.

Ray Pritchard, “Amazing Grace” https://www.youtube.com/live/yhQ_xxjAaVs?feature=share

John Newton’s Tombstone, <https://www.gracegems.org/2013/02/Newton.html>