

The background of the cover is a dramatic seascape. In the foreground, dark, jagged rocks are partially submerged in churning, white-capped waves. A simple wooden cross stands prominently on the rocks. The sky is a deep, vibrant blue, filled with a large, glowing splash of water that creates a shimmering, golden light. Overlaid on the entire scene is a faint, semi-transparent musical score with various notes and clefs.

AMAZING
grace
Devotions for Lent

MICHAEL HOY

INTRODUCTION

For all who long for God's promise in the midst of grief, despair, guilt and shame, "Amazing Grace" is one of the world's most hopeful hymns. It sings the Good News! And for two and a half centuries, its song has enriched the hearts of many generations, reminding them of the depth and breadth and height of God's enduring love and promise. The song can be heard from the voices of famed singers, in the tunes of bagpipes and in the assembly halls of the faithful gathered for worship. Whenever there is a solemn event or loss for a parish, for the nation or for the world, "Amazing Grace" brings God's comfort and love.

The original words of each stanza of "Amazing Grace" are included in this devotional as helpful themes for weekly sections of reflections. I have also included some of my own selected remarks for each week (called "Behind the Music") that may help shed some light on the history of this hymn.

English poet and Anglican clergyman John Newton wrote the lyrics of "Amazing Grace" in six stanzas. The first four stanzas are most widely known. A seventh stanza from another author was added later. "Amazing Grace" tells the story of Newton's own spiritual journey, which led him from his own scandalous past to his saving conversion and trust in the grace of Christ.

I am grateful for the many scholars who have enriched my own research into Newton's life and this hymn, and I encourage those interested in further reading to consider especially Steve Turner's *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song* (2002) and Jonathan Aitken's *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (2007).

May the words of this hymn and these reflections enrich your own song as you journey with our Lord this Lent to the cross and empty tomb!

MICHAEL HOY



BEHIND THE *music*

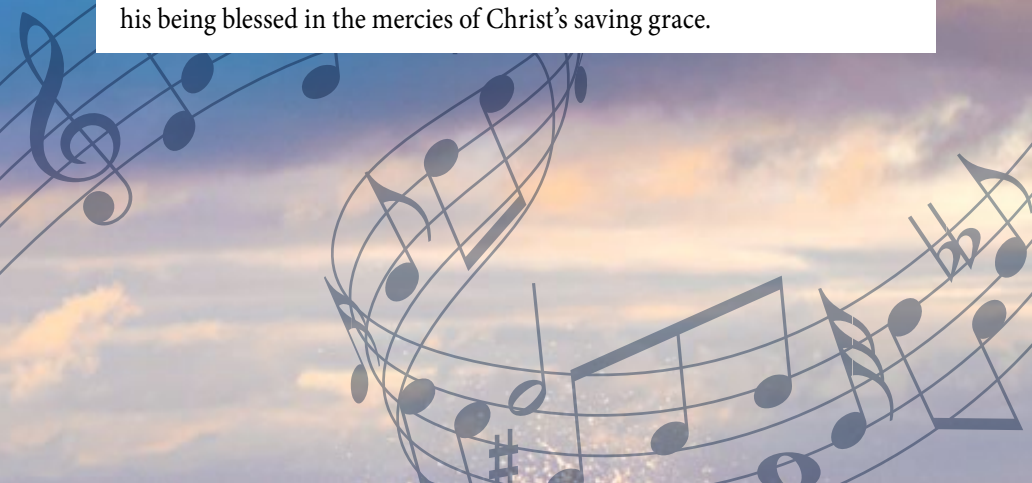
Amazing grace! How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found;

Was blind, but now I see.

When John Newton, a former sea captain, wrote the lyrics of “Amazing Grace” for a sermon on New Year’s Day 1773, he could see the “prodigal son” in his early life. His own father tried on several occasions to help him, but Newton was a hardened prodigal, a self-confessed “wretch” (a word he borrowed from Romans 7:24), distant from the heart of his father as well as the heart of God. Still, John Newton discovered that God in Christ’s deep and abiding love does not give up on anyone. In his opening stanza, he lifts up the story of the prodigal restored to sonship (Luke 15:11-32) and the blind man who received his sight (John 9). Both aptly describe his being blessed in the mercies of Christ’s saving grace.



ASH WEDNESDAY

RETURNING TO AMAZING *grace*

Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love ...

JOEL 2:13

Grace is always a gift from God. It can never be earned or merited by us. Having grace—any grace, all grace, even the grace of creation and of our very being—comes from the hand of a “gracious and merciful” Lord.

Through Jesus Christ, we get to return to our loving God and Father. His path of grace over sin and death for us all goes through the cross and on through the open tomb. In spite of all the wrongs that we have committed, or even our failures to care and provide for others, he gifts us with God’s steadfast love. Repentance means returning to this Source of life, this Font of grace and mercy. Moreover, we even get to become witnesses of this steadfast love and grace for the whole world that languishes in disgrace and despair.

Lent is our invitation. Return to the amazing grace of the Lord your God!
And may all enjoy its happy returns!

Lord, grace us to return to you through your steadfast love and mercy for us
and for all of your creation. Amen.

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

SURPRISED BY *grace*

How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare,
but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will
say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.”

LUKE 15:17-18

The prodigal son in Jesus’ well-known parable has wasted his life and reached
rock bottom. Without even daily bread, he recalls how servants enjoyed the
plenty of his father’s household. He is determined to come back to his father and
confess his sin.

AMAZING *grace*



The prodigal's first surprise comes in his father's haste of grace toward him. For even while this prodigal is a far distance from home, his father sees him and quickly runs to him with great compassion to embrace and kiss him.

But there's more to this surprise. By the time this returned child can barely get the words of confession out of his mouth, the father has already sent for the best robes to replace his tattered rags, sandals for his bare feet and a ring as the emblem of his restored sonship. This child is surprised by grace. And it is far greater than he could possibly imagine. In God's kingdom, all prodigals are restored to being the children of their loving Father.

Father, we have sinned, but we trust your surprising and surpassing grace. Amen.

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

LOST, BUT *found*

We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.

LUKE 15:32

Merriment abounds for the prodigal and his return. Even the fatted calf is on the menu. Yet the elder son is a party pooper, criticizing the father for this extravagant celebration and having nothing to do with his once-wayward brother.

The elder son is actually the lost soul here. While physically close to home, he has distanced himself from the family. He characterizes his own life as that of a slave. But the father wishes him so much more—sonship, not slavery; family, not self-isolation; rejoicing, not gloom.

The Father's compassionate heart finds us where we are—lost and alone. The Father reaches out to us, even welcomes and pleads for us to come home. The feast of the fatted calf, the symbol of Christ's own willing sacrifice, means that there is great abundance and joy, and no prodigal or any lost soul will be left out in the cold. Come, join the celebration!

Father, when we are dead and lost, you make us alive and call us your children. Enrich us in the joy of your extravagant grace and mercy. Amen.

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

BLIND, NOW *seeing*

I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.

JOHN 9:25

A man, formerly blind, makes this bold confession before critical religious authorities. It was risky because of the consequences he would suffer for it—being shunned, silenced and cast out. But it was worth the risk because of its bold promise. His confession was rooted in the One whom he is confessing, Jesus Christ, who graced him with sight—not simply physical sight but the sight of faith. Notice that this man never denies his past blindness (and, therefore, his sin), or his association with the One who is being branded by his critics as a sinner. Instead, he confesses Christ as the Source of his sight.

Jesus Christ will himself be shunned, silenced, cast out and even put to death on a cross for all the judgments of our blindness and sin. But he risks it all so that none of us will be put to shame—a promise for this sighted man and for all who dare to trust and confess that Jesus is the Christ.

Lord Jesus, may we see and trust in your grace over all our sin, and even more boldly confess you. Amen.

AMAZING *grace*



BEHIND THE *music*

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

When Newton was captain of a slave ship, a violent storm threatened to shipwreck his vessel. He prayed for God's grace while at the helm and would later describe it as "the hour I first believed." Embraced by the salutary grace that God loved him in the midst of his terrors, he openly confessed his past scandalous life, trusting Christ above all. This grace that saved Newton's life applied also to his dearest friend and colleague, William Cowper. Cowper was a remarkably gifted spiritual poet, but he suffered from mental illness that caused him to fear that God had rejected him. The last worship service that Cowper would ever attend because of his recurring illness was the one at which Newton first introduced the words of his hymn "Amazing Grace." Cowper later published the song in *Olney Hymns* in 1779.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

YOU HAVE *grace*

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:9

We may hear people say to us, “You have gifts,” or “You are gifted.” Don’t let that go to your head, or keep it to yourself. Let all thanks go to *the Head*—Jesus Christ. Then let it flow to others. All good gifts come from God. And the most “generous act” (the grace) of Christ is that he took on the poverty of our sin through his life, death and resurrection. Through this act of Christ’s grace, the ragged poverty of our forsakenness and despair becomes his, and we get the eternal riches of Christ’s love and promise.

Christ did not hoard what gifts he had but gave them freely. How deep and far-reaching the grace of our Lord goes! As ambassadors of Christ, may we share with all those who find themselves in the depths of “poverty” the great blessings of this abundant grace. You have gifts. Go use them to spread good news to all.

Lord, as you have gifted us through your amazing grace, so embolden us to gift all others, overcoming all poverty with your rich blessing. Amen.

MONDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

JUSTIFYING *grace*

They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ...

ROMANS 3:24

We are like defendants on trial for our sinfulness, and the evidence is overwhelming—even damning. We have no credible defense of our own. Yet the grace of Christ justifies us. Jesus Christ is in our corner as our legal defense. He makes the irrefutable case for our forgiveness as his final and just verdict for us and for our vindication. And for that verdict, he himself is ready and willing to pay the price for our redemption.

AMAZING *grace*



Our faith grasps this promise and grace in Christ for the good news that it is. We can now walk as the ransomed of the Lord. Through Christ's redemption, we have a profoundly new relationship as God's own dear children. There is no legal challenge that can snatch us away from God's hand. We are justified by his grace as a gift.

Father, for the sake of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, keep us in your love and grace as those who are now justified, redeemed and righteous in your sight. Amen.

TUESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

THE BOAST OF *faith*

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

EPHESIANS 2:8

We may sometimes boast of our own works and accomplishments. Having a good record of achievements is helpful when it comes to finding work or having credit or being trusted by others. But such "success," where it exists, can also lead us down a dark path and to a false sense of pride. It can even portray a false image of who we are, covering over the deeper truth of our failings.

Faith, however, is an act of humility. We come empty-handed, for we have nothing of ourselves to claim as worthy except that we are gifted by God's grace. Faith is trusting that our Lord makes us worthy. Faith is bold enough to boast in that promise, and faith will be put to good use for this world. Through faith, we dedicate our own lives for the care and redemption of all that God has made. We share the love and mercy that we ourselves have received through Christ.

Lord, trusting in your saving grace, lead us to humble acts of love and compassion for all. Amen.

AMAZING grace

In honor of the 250th anniversary of the writing of “Amazing Grace,” these Lenten devotions by theologian Michael Hoy tie the words of the beloved song (and the history surrounding it) to our lives today and to the lives of those in the Bible who experienced the amazing grace of God revealed most profoundly in the salvation of Jesus.

For more resources related to “Amazing Grace” visit CreativeCommunications.com/AmazingGrace



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