



Tim Pauley
PO Box 58403, Charleston, WV 25358
304.767.8430
tim.pauley@capitolcom.org

Amazing Grace! (Ephesians 2:4-10)

The life of Charles Colson is perhaps one of the most powerful examples of a government leader whose life was changed by the gospel. Colson was special counsel to President Richard Nixon and was well known as "Nixon's hatchet man" famously saying, "I'd walk over my own grandmother for the president". Caught up in the fallout of the Watergate scandal and facing arrest and the possibility of prison, God used these circumstances to lead Colson to repentance and faith in Christ. His life was changed. After serving time in prison Colson went on to found Prison Fellowship, a ministry serving prisoners and their families. Colson's life is certainly a testimony to the grace of God.

We are all familiar with Christianity's most popular and well-known hymn "Amazing Grace". Most of us know at least something about the hymn's author, John Newton. He too was a sinner whose life was greatly changed by the grace of God. A wicked man and a slave ship captain, when he repented and trusted Christ, his life was marvelously transformed. We learn what grace is in God's Word, and we see it demonstrated in the lives of men like Chuck Colson and John Newton (and each of us).

Amazing Grace in John Newton's Salvation

John was born to a godly mother and sea-faring father. His mother died when he was six. Left to himself, he became a depraved sailor. At 20 years of age he was cast ashore in West Africa where he spent 18 months virtually a slave himself before a ship captained by an acquaintance of his father took him aboard. The ship was at sea a year before it headed home for England. They were caught up in a violent storm and he cried out for mercy and survived the ordeal. He spent the rest of the voyage reading and praying over the scriptures. Upon returning home, his life greatly changed though he would later write that he did not believe he was genuinely converted at this point. He went on to serve six years as the captain of slave ships until an epileptic seizure put an end to his sailing career.

He began to teach himself theology and biblical languages and spent time with evangelical leaders in both Anglican and independent churches. He was particularly taken with the evangelist George Whitefield. It was during this time that he truly repented and trusted Christ. He became a very active lay person in his church and in 1764 he was called to Pastor Olney Church where he served for 16 years. Then, at 54 he was called to pastor St. Mary's church in London where he faithfully served for 27 years. Near the end Newton summed up his life:

"My memory is nearly gone but I remember two things; that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour!"

God's Grace in John Newton's Christian Life and Service

In His Pastoring

God's grace was greatly demonstrated in and through his life as a pastor. That God would bring him from a wretched sinner to become a pastor is certainly amazing. That God would use a self-taught man to ministry so effectively is remarkable. John Newton faithfully demonstrated God's grace to others throughout his ministry.

In no instance was this shown more clearly than his ministry to his friend, the poet William Cowper (pronounced "Cooper"). Cowper had a troubled childhood and adolescence and struggled mightily with debilitating depression throughout his life. Newton was faithful to continually encourage and help his friend, even to the point of having Cowper live with him for extended periods on two different occasions. He enlisted Cowper to join him in writing hymns to encourage him in his faith. (Some well-known hymns were written by Cowper: "There is a Fountain" and "God Works in Mysterious Ways".) As Cowper fell into the depths of depression, he gave up on the task and eventually left the church. John did not give up on him though and continued to try to help him. He eventually preached his friend's funeral. John Newton had experienced God's grace and demonstrated that grace in his love and ministry to Cowper and countless others.

God's Grace in John Newton's Song Writing

Of course, John Newton is best known for the hymn, "Amazing Grace". He was a prolific poet and hymnwriter. During his time at Olney Church he usually wrote a hymn each week, often dealing with the passage from which he was preaching. His hymns were filled with sound teaching and theology to help his largely illiterate congregation learn biblical truth. Cowper also participated in writing

some of these hymns and together they were collected in what is known as *The Olney Hymnal*. Many of the hymns speak of the Grace of God ("*Amazing Grace*" is from this hymnal) and God's grace is clearly demonstrating in Newton's ability to write such deep, encouraging hymns.

God's Grace in John Newton's Letter Writing

John Newton was an inexhaustible letter writer. In our day of email, text messaging, and blog posts we have lost the appreciation (and perhaps the ability) to write meaningful letters. Newton wrote to church members, fellow pastors, acquaintances, and people seeking his advice on many different matters. We are blessed to have collections of these letters and in them we see God's grace at work in his great knowledge, wisdom, and love for the Lord and for his people.

Amazing Grace in the Bible

This grace of which John Newton spoke is one of the central and most important words in the Christian faith yet defining it succinctly can be difficult. Someone proposed defining grace by its acronym: **God's Riches At Christ's Expense**. This might be a good description, but not really a definition. Most simply, "grace" can be defined as *God's unmerited favor*.

The important part of this definition is "*unmerited*". Grace means that we receive something that we do not deserve. It is not something we earn. It is not an "entitlement". The problem is we often see religion and Christianity as an entitlement program. Because we try to be good people and do good for others, we feel or believe that we deserve or earn God's favor. Yet the Bible makes it clear that we can never earn and will never deserve God's favor. We are never entitled to His favor based on anything we do. As a matter of fact, "God's unmerited favor" does not go far enough. God's grace is not merely His unmerited favor. It is His favor given to those who are sinners who deserve nothing but His wrath and punishment. Before we can truly understand God's amazing grace we must first realize the reality of our own sinfulness and unworthiness. As Newton wrote,

"The more vile and sinful we are in our own eyes; the more precious Christ will be to us".

So, we can define grace as *the free and loving working of a holy God in the lives of undeserving sinners*.

"Grace" is spoken of often throughout the Bible, but perhaps it is described most clearly in Ephesians:

⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 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. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Eph. 2:4-9)

Paul reminds us we are undeserving and unworthy of God's goodness. We were "dead in our transgressions". Earlier in the chapter he described us as dead in our sin (v. 1); walking sinfully in step with the world and the devil (v. 2); living in the lust of our flesh (v. 3); and as "children of wrath" (condemned and under God's righteous judgment because of our sin - v.3).

We might look at John Newton's life and see how that was certainly true of him. But most of us were not rotten scoundrels like him. It is only when we consider God's absolute standard of holiness, then we quickly realize how sinful we are. Because of grace God sent His Son to live, suffer, and die so that sinners like John Newton - and us - might be forgiven of our sin and made right with Him.

Paul then writes of all the blessings we receive through God's grace. God will forgive us and save us through what Christ did for us on the cross (vs. 4-6). Paul writes of the "surpassing riches of God's grace" which were shown us in Christ Jesus. (vs. 7). Consider all the blessings which are given by grace. We are made alive with Christ (vs. 5). We are raised with Christ (vs. 6). We are seated with Christ in heavenly places (vs. 6). We will continue to receive the blessings of His grace in ages to come (vs. 7).

While we certainly understand that our salvation is through the grace of God, "grace" is used in the New Testament to refer to everything that God has done (salvation), is doing (sanctification), and will do (glorification) in the lives of those who trust in Him. It points to the whole of the Christian life.

"Who that had seen me as a slave in Africa, could have expected what has since taken place! How unworthy am I of all that I have received—and most unworthy of the honor of preaching the Gospel, which I too long despised and blasphemed! The language of Psalm 40:5 suits my soul well, "Many, O Lord my God, are the wonders You have done. The things You planned for us no one can recount to You! Were I to speak and tell of them—they would be too many to declare!" There is no end to the inventory of my mercies! May He who has given so much to me, and done so much for me—add the crowning mercy of a thankful heart!"

Both John Newton and Charles Colson never got over God's Amazing Grace. May that be true of our lives as well!

Resources:

Biographical information: *John Newton: The Tough Roots of His Habitual Tenderness*. John Piper. www.desiringgod.org.

The Olney Hymnal. You can find the hymnal in a number of formats here:

<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/newton/olneyhymns.html>

John Newton's Letters:

http://gracegems.org/Newton/John_Newton1.htm

CAPITOL BIBLE STUDIES

Thursdays 12:00 Noon

McManus Conference Room

(M252 Located by House minority offices)