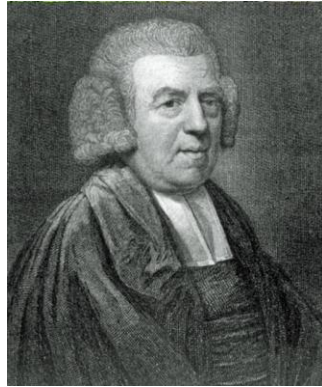


John Newton: Amazing Grace



By Maggie Moller

“Sing praises to the Lord, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what He has done.”

Psalm 9:11

“Sing to the Lord, praise His name; proclaim His salvation day after day.”

Psalm 96:2

Nearly everyone knows the famous hymn “Amazing Grace”. But not everyone knows the story about the man who penned these famous words.

John Newton was born in London, England on July 25, 1725. His mother was a devout Christian woman, and she tried to teach young John the importance of following God. Sadly, his mother’s Godly influence ended with her death when John was only 6 years old. Since John’s father was a sea captain, he had been raised almost completely by his mother due to the long absences from his father.

Shortly after his mother’s death, John’s father remarried. His new stepmother did not want to be bothered with raising her husband’s son, so she arranged for John to be sent to boarding school. While he was at the school, John became friends with the other boys. Many of these boys were very wild and soon taught John to cheat and swear. In a short time, all his mother’s efforts to teach him about the Bible and how to live a Godly life were gone.

When John turned 11, his father decided to take him to sea with him. John was excited to finally spend more time with his father. But, this too proved to be harmful to John’s way of life. He soon was even more wild and willful than before and would disobey orders. Finally, even his father could control him no longer and sent him off to a different ship, glad to be done dealing with his difficult and troublesome son.

In 1743, when John was 18, he joined the British navy. He acted just the same in the navy as he had while on his father’s ship: undependable, disrespectful, and disobedient. The last straw came when he was caught attempting to desert the navy. At this, the captain of his ship locked him up as a prisoner. While still at sea, the navy ship met up with a trade ship from Africa. The captain of the trade ship asked the navy captain if he had any unfaithful sailors to “donate” for work on the trade ship. No one had to wonder who would be chosen.

He soon escaped from the trade ship and made his way to Africa in an attempt to make his fortune. In Africa, he met a slave trader and went to work with him. Unfortunately, he was tricked and ended up a slave himself. He was abused and mistreated, but still his heart remained hardened toward God. Soon John was rescued by a friend of his father and made his way back to England. It was on this journey back home John finally admitted his need for Christ.

On March 10, 1748, John awoke to the sound of screaming. As he became more fully awake, he realized the ship had encountered a storm and was in great danger of sinking. John, who could not swim, soon realized the gravity of their situation. Should the ship sink, he would surely die. In these moments of fearing the closeness of death, John remembered the long forgotten teachings of his mother. The Lord saw fit to deliver the ship, and from that day forward, John committed his life to the service of his Savior.

John continued his work as a slave trader and even became the captain of his own ship. As he grew in his walk with the Lord, he became convicted that what he was doing was wrong. Slaves often became sick or died as a result of the transportation conditions. John saw the sufferings of the poor Africans, taken from their families and homes against their will, in a whole new light.

When he quit working in the slave trade industry, John took a position as a tide surveyor in Liverpool. While he worked in Liverpool, he studied the Scriptures. As John grew in his faith, he wanted to tell others about the saving grace of Jesus. He prayed for God to show him how to tell others the message of salvation. He soon felt God wanted him to become a pastor. However, due to his rough past and minimal training, churches were reluctant to accept him for their church. After a long, hard struggle to find a church, he was finally accepted in 1764 for ministry at the church in Olney, a small village in England.

It was during his years in Olney, John wrote "Amazing Grace." In this hymn, one of the many hymns he wrote, he tells the story of his wonderful conversion from an enemy of the Lord to one of His children. A fitting verse for John's hymn is found in John 9:25b where it says, "I was blind but now I see!"

John was happy serving the Lord in Olney, but he still was deeply saddened by the sorrow he caused so many Africans by his involvement in the slave trade. He prayed that the Lord would show him some way he could help prevent further pain to the African people. His answer came to him in the form of a young man in need of advice. This young man was William Wilberforce. Young William was a new Christian, and he felt God had a purpose for his life. In a letter he wrote to John, he said, "I feel God has some important plan for my life. Will you help me discover it?" John was delighted! William, as a government official, had an impact on the laws of England. Together, John and William worked hard to abolish the slavery laws in England. In 1807, just a few months before John died, the English government passed a law outlawing slave trade in England.

Shortly before his death, John said these simple but true words, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior!" Even though John did not live a life honoring God for the early part of his life, he understood that once he accepted God's gift of salvation, Christ's blood covered over all his sins and made him clean in the eyes of God. If he had dwelt on the bad things he had done in his life, he would have felt he could never measure up to God's standards. And he would have been right. No one can save himself; we must all go through Christ. Romans 6:23 says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

John's tombstone reads:

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 so long labored to destroy

Next time we sing “Amazing Grace”, remember the humble life of John Newton who truly was saved by God’s amazing grace.

Works Consulted

For Those Who Dare: 101 Great Christians and How They Changed the World

by John Hudson Tiner

Mr. Pipes and the British Hymn Makers

by Douglas Bond

Hero Tales Volume II: A Family Treasure of True Stories From the Lives of Christian Heroes

by Dave and Neta Jackson