

Amazing Grace

February 18, 2007

Special Speaker: Josh Kelley

AMAZING GRACE SUNDAY



Today, we're joining with the National Association of Evangelicals and thousands of churches in observing today as "Amazing Grace Sunday," which marks two events.

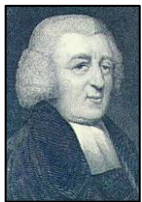
First, this Friday, February 23rd, marks the 200th anniversary of when Great Britain outlawed slave trading.



Secondly, this Friday is also the release of the motion picture "Amazing Grace," which tells the story of the British politician William Wilberforce in his forty-year fight to end slavery.

Wilberforce was a remarkable man. At age 21, he became a Member of Parliament (similar to a congressman). Four years later he became a Christian and struggled with how to best serve his God:

- Should he enter the ministry or stay in politics?



He sought the advice of one of the most respected pastors of his day, still well-known today: John Newton.

Q How many of you have heard of him? That's John Newton, not Isaac Newton of apple fame.



Before I tell you what advice he gave young Wilberforce, I need to tell you more about Newton: At a young age, he became a merchant sailor and had a reputation of living a life that made other sailors blush. Before long, he became British slave trader.

On one of his voyages, his ship nearly sank in a fierce storm. They lost most of its food and their ability to navigate and were literally within days of cannibalism when they reached land. Before they reached land, he finally recognized God's hand on his life and cried out to Him. Newton left his ungodly ways, stopped slave trading, and became a pastor who was committed to ending slavery.

He also wrote a hymn that, in a way, told his story. That hymn has become the world's most popular song. It has been recorded over 1,000 times.

Q Can you guess the song?

And so what advice do you think that John Newton, a former slave trader saved and transformed by God's amazing grace, gave to this up and coming politician?

I want to show you the trailer for the movie. It's rated PG, for strong thematic elements and mild language. But it promises to be an inspiring film about putting your faith into action. [Clip: Trailer (2:30)]

SAVED BY GRACE

When John Newton wrote "that saved a wretch like me," he was not being humble. Slave traders are pretty low on the "sinners" list. The Apostle Paul puts it down there with those who kill their parents (1 Timothy 1:10).

Wretch is a pretty strong term; but it doesn't mean worthless - we all have been created by God and are very valuable.

- To be wretched is to be hopeless, so far of the mark that you have no shot.

Q What goes through **YOUR** head when you sing "a wretch like me"?

Do you have an honest recognition of your state? Do you think, "That's me - I'm a loser, in desperate need of God's grace." Or do you think, "That's putting it a little harsh."

- I know what happens in my head, I replace "wretch like me" with "Bruce."

If we're honest with ourselves, most of think we stack up pretty well in the grand scheme of things. I know that I feel that way. I grew up in the church and don't even have a descent testimony.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men-- robbers, evildoers, adulterers-- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." - Luke 18:9-14 NIV



We cannot receive God's saving grace until we repent of our sins, then honestly and humbly admit our wretched state to Him.

- Grace can only save a wretch like me.

NOT GETTING WHAT WE DESERVE

What exactly is grace? We use the word in so many ways: we say grace before meals, credit cards have a grace period, and my daughter's name is Grace. The grace Newton wrote about is God's saving grace. It's not receiving the punishment we deserve for our wretchedness.

Let say you got pulled over for doing 70 MPH down Burlington Blvd. Not only that, but your tabs are expired, your license is revoked, there's no insurance on the car, you're not wearing a seat belt, and swearing at the officer and ask him why he isn't guarding Dunkin Donuts.



- If he let's you off with a stern warning, that would be grace.

Grace is not getting what we deserve.

GETTING BETTER THAN WE DESERVE

But grace is more than. One theologian said it's "undeserved blessing freely bestowed on man by God." It is the incredible kindness that He shows us, in ways both great and small.

Now say you're a server at Red Robin and you're having a horrible day; you're late for work (which is why you were speeding), and then you mess some guy's order, spill water over him, and swear at him again.



- Now imagine he gives you a \$200 tip - that's grace.

Grace is getting better than we deserve.

DEPTHS OF GRACE

Now back to John Newton: I love to hear the stories of dramatic conversions, the 180° changes. I love them, but I can't relate. Most of us have more of a "three steps forward, two steps back" walk. We mean well, but our actions don't quite match our intentions.

When I told you about Newton's conversion experience, I left a key piece of information: From the time from when he became a Christian until when he gave up slave trading was six years. It took 25 more years for him to speak out against slavery.

Perhaps what makes grace so amazing is its depths. God is amazingly patient with frail and failing people, like John Newton, and like you and me.

RISKY MOVE

This is a risky move on God's part: Do you know someone who has been "saved," but never changed? Are you that someone? God's patience can be mistaken for permission to sin. Paul addressed this in Romans:

Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? – *Romans 6:15-16 NIV*

When we, as genuine believers, take grace as permission to continue sinning, it shows we don't understand sin. Sin is a fatal disease, not something to get away with.

- Sin is that which destroys us, destroys others, and our relationship with God – that's why God wants us to be free from it.

The sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit that leads us to holiness, and away from sin, is a gift of grace, not burden.



- Grace is freedom from sin, not freedom to sin.

As John Newton reached the end of his life and thought back on those six years he spent as a "Christian" slave trader, do you think he thought, "Look what I got away with!"? Or, "Through many dangers, toils and snares You have lead me home; dangers I put myself in, toils and pain I inflicted on myself and others, snares that nearly snagged my soul."?

There is one more clip I want to show you, as Newton remembers those six years. [Clip: I once was blind (1:30)]

When we stand before God, and clearly see how much damage our sin did, we will not say "Wow, look at all I got away with." We will say, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

And then our Father will take us in His arms, and tell us, "All is forgiven, welcome home." And it will be our joy to sing God's praise for all eternity.