

Amazing Grace

Romans 7

4-26-2026

“Do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to men who know the law—that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.” But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.”

(Romans 7)

Last week I shared the story of Rasputin, who lived in Russia over 100 years ago. Using the name of God to justify his sin, one of his primary teachings was that sin is good because it allows God to forgive and display his mercy. The more you sin the better God looks, so he encouraged his followers to become extraordinary sinners. He was a major contributing factor for 70 years of official hostility towards religion and the church in Russia.

This morning I want to go back 300 years to share another man's story. A man whose life for many years was at least as wretched as Rasputin's.

I use that word wretched quite deliberately because that the word he used to described it. Where the name Rasputin means the debauched or depraved one. Wretched is defined by such terms as despicable and contemptible. But his life had a very different ending because along the way, he discovered the amazing power of grace to save and transform a life even as wretched as his.

It even became the first line of a hymn he wrote which was his testimony, the story of his life. It was originally titled, "Faith's Review and Expectation" but has long since changed its name and become the best known and loved hymn ever written.

We sang it a few minutes ago.

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.

Thus begins the story of John Newton's transformation as a follower of Christ. He was born in London on July 24 in 1725, the son of a sea captain. His mother died when he was only 6 and when he turned 11, he went to sea with his father. At 18 he was pressed into service in the British Royal Navy but when he tried to desert, he was lashed to the grating and flogged in front of the entire crew. He seriously considered murdering the captain for this but while the ship was enroute to India, he was transferred to a slave ship bound for West Africa.

When he couldn't get along with his new crew, they left him in the hands of a slave dealer who then gave him as a slave to his wife, the princess Peye of what is today Sierra Leone who cruelly mistreated him.

One chronicler described him as "a wretched looking man toiling on a plantation of lemon trees...his clothes became rags, he had no shelter and begged for unhealthy roots to allay his hunger."

Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.

After 3 years as a slave, he was rescued by a sea captain sent by his father to search for his son. Once free, he made his way back to London and himself became the captain of a slave ship where he lived what was said to be the most ungodly and immoral life possible.

One biographer wrote, "It is reported that at times he was so wretched that even his crew regarded him as little more than an animal. Once he fell overboard and his ship's crew refused to drop a boat for him. Instead, they threw a harpoon at him and dragged him back to the ship.

It was while drunk during a violent storm in which it seemed sure to sink the ship, that he cried out to the Lord, asking for mercy and he discovered grace, undergoing what he referred to as his "great deliverance."

Through many dangers' toils and snares, I have already come. Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

Contrary to some notions, being saved did not noticeably change his behavior at first. There were many years yet of sin and firmly entrenched habits which had to be worn away and exchanged for a new way of living.

For six years after he gave his life to the Lord, he continued to captain slave ships. But God was working within him and when he eventually returned to England, he became a minister of the Gospel, known for his hymns and his preaching

The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures. He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.

He wrote his own epitaph, which remains on his tomb which says,

John Newton, Clerk, once an infidel and libertine (libertine refers to someone who is immoral and unrestrained by morality, wretched). His epitaph continues, **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.**

His conversion and his life are a testimony to God's amazing grace and power to change and transform lives through faith in Jesus Christ which is declared in each stanza of this famous hymn, ending with the confident assurance,

When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing Gods praise then when we've first begun.

That word wretched has often been used to describe him, both by himself and his biographers.

It's interesting to note that the first line where he used it to describe what God had done for him, is also the one which has often received the greatest objections from people today who take issue with the idea of being referred to as wretches.

It's not uncommon to walk into some churches which have changed the words, singing instead, Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved and set me free, or that saved and strengthened me, or saved a soul like me.

But this completely ignores the fact that Newton saw himself as a sinner so vile that only an act of Gods amazing grace could save him.

In this, he was very much in keeping with the words of Paul where after describing his struggles with sin, here in chapter 7 he declares in verse 24, what a wretched man that I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?

a central part of the message of Romans is that we are all wretched sinners.

But in answer, there is also grace as he declares, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Amazing grace that no matter what we've done or what we may have become, it enables us to also say, I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

Amazing grace is the message of chapters 3-5 which says we are justified and made right with God not through the law and our own efforts but only by faith in Jesus Christ through the grace of God.

It is also amazing grace that transforms and sets us free from sin and its power

That is the message of chapters 6-8.

In Jesus we find the amazing grace to save

Grace to live out the new life we've found in Him.

And grace to lift us up when we fall
The same grace and faith which saves us, grows us into Christ's likeness

we may still struggle with sin, but in chapter 6 Paul assures us that when we are united with Christ, we died to sin and it will no longer be our master.

Baptism is the illustration he uses to make this point.

Baptism symbolizes not just Jesus' death and resurrection, but ours as well when we identify with him

In Christ we have died to sin, been buried with him, and are now raised with him so we need to learn how to live like it.

as he continues in chapter 7, Paul states that because we are dead to sin, we have been set free from the law and can now serve Christ.

Again, it is stated not as some future event but already completed

We don't need to try to set ourselves free but trust that Jesus has already done it for us

While the word grace is not used in the chapter, it is all about grace that sets us free from the law and trying to save ourselves by it

The illustration he uses here to make his point is marriage

Stating that marriage laws apply only as long as both partners are living, but if one dies the laws no longer apply and the other is free to marry someone else.

If we died with Christ then we are now free from the law and are now free to live in the newness of life Jesus offers

The difficulty is that we may not yet consider ourselves free but still be locked in our old patterns and habits and ways of seeing the world

It took Newton years to replace his old ways with new ones.

In making this point, Stuart Briscoe told the story of his own experience as a raw recruit in the Royal Marines during the Korean conflict. His company was under the supervision of a particularly intimidating sergeant major who dictated how life was going to be for these young soldiers. Briscoe said he didn't realize what a dominant controlling force the sergeant major had become in his life until the day he was discharged from the marines. On that day he knew he was a free man. No more orders; no more drills; no more Yes Sirs! Yet in spite of what he knew was true, the first time he encountered the sergeant major after walking out of the discharge office as a free man, he still popped to attention and acted just as if he were still under the

sergeant major's control. Even though he was now dead to the sergeant major, he had to learn to what it meant to live as a free man.

Only then could he begin to enjoy and live out of his freedom. Regardless of how his former superior may have disliked Briscoe's new posture and attitude, he was powerless to do anything about it. Briscoe had been discharged from—Briscoe had died to—the sergeant major and his laws.

Things had changed. Life had changed. But he had to now learn how to start living out of that change instead of falling back to his old ways

That is just where we can find ourselves, our situation has changed but we haven't yet figured out what that is to look like. As a result, we may be free but continue to struggle with sin

until we begin to learn to live out of our new status of freedom in Christ, we will continue give sin and the law a power over us they no longer really have.

Weighed down by guilt from our failures to live up to the law

Paul declares the law no longer has authority over us, it is no longer the standard to go by, Jesus is through His Spirit we have been set free

We are dead to sin and are now alive in Christ.

We have been set free from the law so we can now serve and live for Christ.

In :7-13 Paul points out that the law itself was never even intended to save us from sin but rather to reveal it and lead us to the one who can do something about it

The law defines sin, shows us what is ruining our lives and separating us from God and one another

And if we allow it to do its intended work, it will lead us to the realization of our need for Gods amazing grace as John newton discovered

CS Lewis' spiritual mentor was a man named George MacDonald. He said that the point of the commandments was never that we should succeed in obeying every one of them, but the more we fell short, the more it would drive us to the source of life and the law and to seek Him because the only way to obey them is through His help.

even though he was saved, in :14-25 Paul describes his continued struggle with sin and its hold over him, stating he keeps doing the very things he hates and wants to stop and is not strong enough to do the good he wants to do.

Finally crying out in verse 24, “What a wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of sin and death?”

And his answer, Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord

Change and victory over sin do come, it just may take some time as old ways and habits need to be replaced with new ones

We need to learn to live in the freedom Jesus bought us with his blood
And that can be slow, often difficult, and even intimidating for us

In 2004, Nicholas Kristof ran a story in the NY Times titled—Bargaining for Freedom. The basis of the story was his experience in Cambodia when he decided to buy the freedom of two prostitutes from their brothel owners. His criteria for selecting the young women was that they had to be there against their will, were willing to tell their story, and actually wanted to leave prostitution.

The first woman named Srey Neth, was a simple transaction. For \$150, Kristof left with the girl and a receipt. The second, Srey Mom’s situation proved to be much more difficult, since the brothel owner demanded more money.

Kristof wrote, After some grumpy negotiation, the owner accepted \$203 as the price for Srey Mom’s freedom. But then Srey Mom told me that she had pawned her cell phone and needed \$55 to get it back. Forget about your cellphone, I said. We’ve got to get out of here. Srey Mom started crying. I told her that she had to choose her cell phone or her freedom, and she ran back to her tiny room in the brothel and locked the door.

With Srey Mom sobbing in her room and refusing to be freed without her cell phone, the other prostitutes—her closest friends—began pleading with her to be reasonable. Even the owner of the brothel begged her to grab this chance while she could. But Srey Mom hysterically refused to leave.

Srey Mom only stopped crying when Kristof agreed to buy back her cell phone too. Then she asked for her pawned jewelry to be part of the deal. Kristof reflected on the complex emotions making the decision to leave the brothel so difficult when he wrote:

I have purchased the freedom of two human beings so I can return them to their villages. But will emancipation help them? Will their families and villages accept them? Or will they, like some other girls rescued from sexual servitude, find freedom so unsettling that they slink back to slavery in the brothels? We'll see.

Sin is like that. It holds us in slavery and Jesus comes and sets us free but we can become so accustomed and attached to it that we refuse to live in our freedom, sometimes even preferring the bondage we had because it is what we are most familiar with.

God's Amazing grace sets us free from the law and our sin which only lead to death. But we need to learn to live in that grace, that is the work of sanctification