

This year marks the 250th anniversary of the first use of the hymn, "Faith's Review and Expectation," better known today by the name, "[Amazing Grace](#)." Millions of people around the world know the song, written by atheistic-ex-human trafficker-turned Christian cleric and abolitionist John Newton (1725 – 1807).

First sung on January 1, 1773, at the church Newton pastored in Olney, England, the text was paired some 60 years later with the tune most commonly used today, "New Britain." Bass-baritone [Wintley Phipps \(8:46\)](#) has noted that this melody is built on the pentatonic (five-note) scale, aka the "slave scale" played on the five black keys of the piano.

"Here is a hymn of great Christian significance," observed James Walvin, author of the new book [Amazing Grace: A Cultural History of the Beloved Hymn](#), "written by a man who's stained by the brutality and violence of slavery. It's a historical paradox, really." It is also an apt depiction of the way Newton viewed his own depravity and the grace of God that turned his life around.

The son of a sea captain who was away from home for extended periods of time and a devout woman who died just before Newton turned 7, the boy embarked on his first voyage with his father at the age of 10. His childhood trauma no doubt contributed to his immorality and self-indulgence during his youth, when he was given to drinking, gambling, profanity and mockery of those who held Christian beliefs.

When he was 18, Newton was pressed into the Royal Navy, but left his post without permission, hoping his father could get him transferred to the Merchant Navy. The teen was caught, publicly stripped, flogged until he lost consciousness, and demoted. In his rage over his humiliation, Newton plotted to murder the captain and commit suicide by throwing himself overboard.

Before he could carry out his plan, he was transferred to a slave ship headed for West Africa, where he was handed over to Amos Clow, a slave trader, in 1745. Clow enslaved him and gave him to his African wife, Princess Pey Ey, who abused and starved him, and withheld medical care from him after he contracted malaria. Clow also put him in irons at times. In 1748, Newton was rescued by a sea captain Newton's father had asked to search for him.

On March 10, while Newton was sailing back to England, a violent storm arose. A crew member who relieved Newton was swept off the ship's deck moments later and drowned. Shaken, Newton prayed for God's mercy, and the wind and the waves settled down. Facing the powerful forces of nature, Newton felt his own helplessness, and realized that only God's grace could save him.

After years dabbling in atheism, African paganism and moon worship, Newton began reading the Bible and other Christian literature. This incident marked what Newton would later describe in "Amazing Grace," as "the hour I first believed." In [Acts 18:27](#), Luke writes about "those who through grace had become believers."

"I thought ... there never was or could be a sinner as myself: and then ... concluded at first, that my sins were too great to be forgiven," Newton wrote later. "I consider this as the beginning of my return to God, or rather His return to me: but I cannot consider myself to have been a believer in the full use of the word till a considerable time afterwards."

Like "millions of people at the time, ... [who saw] no contradiction in their faith and their behavior toward Africans," said historian James Walvin, Newton didn't immediately see any conflict between his new beliefs and his employment as a captain of slave ships. While his own experience as a slave may have given him some empathy for the African slaves he transported, his conversion from slaver to abolitionist was not instantaneous. He continued to invest in the slave trade for a time even after poor health forced him to give up seafaring.

As his faith matured, Newton repented of his involvement in the slave trade. He wrote, "I think I should have quitted sooner had I considered it as I now do to be unlawful and wrong."

Eventually Newton became a minister in the Church of England.

For 22 years, Newton mentored William Wilberforce, who led the campaign in Parliament to abolish the African slave trade. Newton sent copies of his pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, describing the horrific conditions of the slave ships, to every member of the legislature. He wrote: "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me ... that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."

Just before Newton's death in 1807, the Slave Trade Act was enacted, ending the English government's participation in the slave trade.

Before his death, Newton indicated the epitaph he wanted to be inscribed on his tombstone:

John Newton, Clerk.  
Once an infidel and libertine,  
A servant of slaves in Africa,  
Was, by the mercy of our Lord and Savior  
Jesus Christ  
Preserved, restored, pardoned,  
And appointed to preach the Faith  
He had long labored to destroy.

**Note:** *The following paragraphs refer to the order of stanzas of "Amazing Grace" as they appear [here](#).*

When Newton penned "Amazing Grace" in December 1772, he described himself as "a wretch" saved by amazing grace, who once was lost but then was found, like the Prodigal Son in [Luke 15:11-32](#), and who once was blind but who regained their sight, like the blind men Jesus healed ([Matthew 20:29-34](#); [Mark 8:22-25](#); etc.) and like Saul when he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

The second stanza offers another perspective on grace: "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear." There is a form of fear that is quite healthy -- the fear that arises when we face significant danger, the fear that causes us to take preventive measures. This verse says that God teaches us to fear, i.e., he plants within us the healthy alarm that rings inside our head when we are about to do some wrong thing. That is the active grace of God.

But then, Newton wrote, grace also relieved his fear. God's grace assures us our trust in him is not misplaced. It frees us from the paralyzing fear that keeps us from doing the right thing. That too is a gift of God.

On multiple occasions, Newton came "[t]hrough many dangers, toils and snares" as stanza 3 of his hymn suggests. Once he was thrown from a horse, and just missed impalement on a row of sharp stakes. Another time, he arrived too late to join a boat tour of a warship, and watched, horrified, as the vessel carrying his companions overturned, drowning all its passengers. Newton affirms that just as grace has brought us through a host of troubles already, it will carry us home.

The fourth stanza recalls God's promise of goodness, and that it is God's word that secures our hope. Grace is not something we do, but something God does for us.

The next two stanzas, which are not always included in hymnals, indicate that God provides grace not only in this life ("as long as life endures"), but for eternity.

The last stanza was not written by John Newton but by someone else -- possibly John P. Rees in the mid-1800s. The first time it appears is in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Maybe that's a way of showing that the message of grace takes on life for new generations. Each generation finds its own way to rephrase grace, but its reality is always amazing.