



**Glenn Brown**

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441 ½ Lark Drive

Grand Junction, Colorado 81504

telephone 970-434-1377

## **AMAZING GRACE**

“Amazing Grace” is considered the most beloved hymn of the last two centuries and is performed an estimated ten million times annually, and it has appeared in over 11,000 albums. The song was written by John Newton while he was the pastor of a small church in Olney in the English midlands. It was first published in a book of hymns in 1773, almost 250 years ago.

John Newton was born in 1725 in London to a Puritan mother and a stern sea-captain father. His mother died just before John was seven years old, and he was taken to sea by his father at age eleven. By the age of seventeen, John Newton’s world was the open sea. The world of the Spirit, as taught by his mother, had vanished, and he declined into rebellion. Newton later wrote about his life and said that by the age of twenty he was never an hour in anyone’s company without attempting to corrupt their character. He once said of himself, “My daily life was a course of the most terrible blasphemy. Not content with common profanities and cursing, I daily invented new ones.”

When he was still a teen-ager, and while on shore in a foreign port, he was kidnapped by the press-gang of a British naval ship and found himself a sailor in her Majesty’s navy. (That’s the way they used to get “volunteers” in the British navy!) After a couple of years of brutal treatment he tried to escape from that situation, but he was caught, received 96 lashes, and placed in shackles. Eventually he was released from the British navy but soon found himself to be a virtual slave of the captain of a slave ship. Time passed, he won the favor of a different captain and finally became captain of his own slave ship.

At age twenty-five, during a storm at sea, a hole was torn in the hull of his ship and it started sinking. In desperation, Newton prayed. The ship lurched, some cargo shifted and sealed the hole so that they were able to make port. Newton was confronted with the reality of God and said at that time he was converted and became a believer, but that he was only partially converted. He continued as a slave captain for another ten years! He described the brutality of that life. They aimed fixed deck guns at the holds where the slaves were chained so that if any escaped they could be instantly killed. They commonly lashed and beat and even used thumb screws on rebellious slaves. He said that his heart was so hard that he had no conscience about his life, even though he had started reading the Bible and felt himself to be a Christian.

A health issue forced Newton to retire from his life at sea, he became a surveyor and got involved with a small church at Olney. His faith grew and he was asked to be the pastor of that church. He later wrote an autobiography about his life as a slave-captain and also wrote hymns, including “Amazing Grace,” and became famous in all of England. In time, he became pastor of a large church in London. It was there, in his later years, that he became friends with William Wilberforce, the member of Parliament whose love for Christ and whose lifetime war against the slave trade is credited with causing England to finally pass laws against slavery. In 1788, about forty years after he first made a commitment to Christ, Newton wrote a ten-thousand word pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, attacking slavery and confessing his part in the vicious practice. This pamphlet, together with Newton’s autobiography, and especially his famous hymn, were certainly a part of turning the national conscience of England against the vicious practice of slavery. (Would to God that we had had a John Newton and a William Wilberforce in the young United States. Perhaps we could have avoided the national tragedy of the Civil War which cost the lives of 640,000 men.)

In his book, Captured by Grace, David Jeremiah says that there is no microwave method of spiritual maturity, that we all have to *work out our salvation with fear and trembling*. (Phil.

2:12) We might imagine John Newton experiencing his moment of grace onboard his slave ship, turning back the ship to unload the slaves, and quickly sitting down to pen the verses to Amazing Grace. But history tells another story: a story of the slave trader docking in Liverpool and then promptly signing himself on for another voyage to Africa. There he traveled from slave factory to slave factory, buying slaves and storing them in his ship, just like always. He sailed for the New World and studied his Bible as two hundred slaves were packed into shelves in the hold beneath him. On many voyages, as many of one-third of these men, women and children died. Many others developed illnesses. Newton disembarked from the voyage and enjoyed his pleasant life and friendships in Charleston, South Carolina, as the slaves went to market, some to be separated from their spouses and children, and on to their destinies on the rice plantations and cotton fields that were to be their places of degradation, suffering and death.

It is a shocking fact that in that historical time most believers did not see slavery as evil. It took many decades for John Newton to awake to the horror and true evil of his former life and vocation.

Maybe it would be wise for us to reflect on John Newton's life. Is it possible that there are thoughts, attitudes, and practices in our lives that are an absolute horror to our God? Let's ask our loving Savior to shine His light into our hearts and onto our lives.

*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.*

## **WHERE DID WE COME FROM?**

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.* (Gen. 1:1) That declaration cannot be proved scientifically. You can choose to believe it or not. If you don't believe it, you must come up with some other idea, which will also be a belief. An astronomer just published a paper saying that the Hubble telescope has now revealed in deep space probably four or five times more galaxies than previously thought, as many as two trillion galaxies! Each galaxy has a hundred billion stars or so. Each star is a massive nuclear furnace reaching 2,000 to 4,000 degrees. One of those galaxies has a star which has a planet which is our home. It's like a grain of sand in the Sahara Desert. Did it just "happen" that life evolved on this insignificant speck in the cosmos? That's what a lot of really educated people believe. What do you believe?

The Bible says, *God has planted eternity in the human heart, but people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end.* (Eccl. 3:11) It also says, *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with your whole heart.* (Jer. 29:13) If you are uncertain and in doubt about the existence of God and about the meaning of your life, you can only resolve your confusion when you determine to search for God until you find Him.

## **COURAGE!** (Mostly from a message by Bobby Schuler)

When the world gets scary, society tells you to withdraw; hide in a bunker; start taking strong pills, smoking pot, drinking booze, watching more television; retreat into denial. But you don't have to worry about sickness, poverty, death and loss. You have faith in God, and He tells you again and again, "Be strong and courageous!"

We know that Bible history tells how the Hebrews became frightened when they saw the "giants" in the promised land and wanted to go back to Egypt - - - where there was safety and provision and slavery. Liberty is scary. It requires courage and faith. (What was it like for George Washington and his colonist peers and their ragtag little "army" to stand up against the most powerful army and most powerful navy and most powerful air force in the world? (Wait! For some reason they didn't have an air force.)

Fear and worry will destroy God's plan for your life. Anxiety and stress will destroy your peace and your health. Really! If we are going to accomplish something for God in this life we will have to do things that are scary. Courage is a requisite for those who follow Christ. Consider a little teen-aged girl who was given the honor of bearing the Messiah, the Son of God. Oops! No husband. Later, King Herod sent a hit-squad to kill her baby. Later still, the religious police and the political police publicly murdered Him.

A man told me that for several years he was the accountant for a certain business and that he started being pressured to

cook the books. Because he would not do that he was eventually forced out of his job and out of the company.

Do you remember that school district in Detroit (if I remember correctly) where a big number of teachers and school administrators changed the grades for hundreds of students so that they would pass the national standards?

I have also heard of automobile mechanic shops, and home repair people, that routinely fake repairs and over bill customers.

It takes integrity and courage to stand up against such pressures in this world.

Bobby Schuler said that when he was 12 years old, in the 7<sup>th</sup> Grade, a big boy in his class was a bully. Bobby carried his lunch to school: sandwich, apple and cookie, in a metal lunch box. One day the big boy walked up to him, grabbed the sandwich out of his hand, took a big bite, and handed it back, laughing. He did that again the next day, and the next, and next. Bobby said that on the fifth morning when he prepared his sandwich he went out in the back yard, scooped up some dog poo and put it in his sandwich. At lunch time the big boy again grabbed the sandwich out of his hands and took a big bite. He started spitting and choking. He said, "That tastes like dog (expletive)!" Bobby said, "It is dog (expletive)." That ended the depredations of the sandwich pirate. Bobby said that later they became good friends. Sometimes you have to stand up against a bully, even if it is your spouse or a member of your family.

If we don't face our fears, we will wither away. The root of the terrible plague of addictions in our society is caused by fear, in my opinion. Many of you are undoubtedly facing extremely threatening situations. God loves you. He is with you. Fear not. Trust Him and do what you know to be right.

## **QUOTES AND REFLECTIONS**

2 Cor. 9:6 – *He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.* If you think this verse refers only or even primarily to money, you are sadly diminishing its wisdom.

The Bible promises "riches," or "true riches," or "immeasurable riches" many times. Do you think it is talking about money? What is it talking about?

"Faith" in the Bible is not just believing mentally in God's promises, but believing in them way down deep and acting on them. *Your kingdom come, your will be done in earth* (in me, this guy who is made out of clay) *as it is in heaven.*

*Cast your burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain you.* (Ps. 55:22) Sheep are not meant to carry burdens. Have you ever heard of a "pack-sheep?" If you try to carry worries, fears, your children, your church, the past, the future, it will break you down.

A happy report on NA (Narcotics Anonymous): "After ten years of being a hopeless dope addict, I'm glad to say that I'm now a dopeless hope addict."

## **COME HOME**

A preacher shared the following story: A man who was a committed Christian went away from God for ten years. His wife did not nag him but she remained faithful to the Lord during that time. Finally, his conscience awoke, and he said to his wife, "I need to go back to church."

On the next Sunday morning they were driving to church when he suddenly pulled over to the side of the road, tightly grasped the steering wheel and looked down. His wife asked, "What's wrong?" He said, "I'm a prodigal son. I'm afraid. What if God asks me, 'Where have you been? What have you been doing?' I'm afraid." She put her hand on his arm and quietly prayed. After a while he started driving to church.

At the end of the sermon, the preacher said he got an impression. He stepped down from the platform and walked back to where the man sat and spoke to him: “God says, You have been a prodigal. I don’t care where you have been. I don’t care what you have done. I just want you to come home.”

God Bless

Glenn

**e-mail address** [casabrn441@gmail.com](mailto:casabrn441@gmail.com)

**WEBSITE:** [www.glennbrownministries.com](http://www.glennbrownministries.com)

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