

FINDING GOD
IN THE STORY OF
**AMAZING
GRACE**



KURT BRUNER
JIM WARE


SALTRIVER®

AN IMPRINT OF TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at www.tyndale.com

TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

SaltRiver and the SaltRiver logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Finding God in the Story of Amazing Grace

Copyright © 2007 by Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of ship copyright © by Alan Pappé/Getty Images. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of waves copyright © by Ulf Sjustedt/Getty Images.
All rights reserved.

Author photo of Jim Ware copyright © 2003 by Tom Sluder Photography.
All rights reserved.

Designed by Jessie McGrath

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bruner, Kurt D.

Finding God in the story of amazing grace / Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-1181-4 (hc)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-1181-8 (hc)

1. Newton, John, 1725-1807.
 2. Wilberforce, William, 1759-1833.
 3. Christian converts—Biography.
 4. Conversion—Christianity—Biography.
 5. Grace (Theology)
 6. Amazing grace (Hymn)
- I. Ware, Jim.
II. Title.

BX5199.N55B78 2007

283.092'2—dc22

2006024299

Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Table of Contents

Introduction vii

Part I: John Newton

Maternal Grace 3

Warning Grace 11

Restraining Grace 19

Afflicting Grace 27

Preserving Grace 35

Illuminating Grace 43

Delaying Grace 51

Growing Grace 59

Long-Suffering Grace 67

Part II: William Wilberforce

Sufficient Grace 79

Intervening Grace 87

Gifting Grace 97

Changing Grace 105

Calling Grace 113

Disturbing Grace 121

Persistent Grace	131
Generous Grace	139
Compelling Grace	147
Afterthoughts	155
Endnotes	163
Bibliography	171

Introduction

I'll never forget the worn, deep blue hymnals that stood symmetrically in our traditional Baptist church pew racks when I was a boy. Before I reached puberty I had spent hundreds of hours eyeing and using that sacred relic. When I was five years old, the hymnal served as an ideal table for drawing stick figures during our evangelistic preacher's poetic sermons, keeping me occupied so the grown-ups could absorb the undisturbed conviction and instruction of God's Word. By eight, I could read well enough to follow along.

Our Sunday services, while fiercely nonliturgical, still followed an equally predictable rhythm. So by the time I entered my teen years, I could recall an impressive range of lyrics from memory, enabling me to sing all four verses of the most popular hymns without glancing down at a single page. None was more familiar than "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."

Like I did with most hymns, I sang along without giving the person behind these lyrics much thought. I recall noticing the name John Newton next to the title atop the page, followed by the dates 1725–1807 indicating his birth and death. But I assumed him a stoic hymn writer from two centuries

past with little influence beyond our Sunday morning routine. It never occurred to me that the man who penned such famous words had been one of the more influential figures in the history of Christian faith and human rights. Nor did I have any idea how an archaic church hymn I sang from memory would connect to another, seemingly unrelated adolescent experience.

In 1977, I stumbled upon an episode of a television show I hadn't planned to watch. At fourteen years old, I was probably hoping to tune in *The Six Million Dollar Man* or some other action favorite. Instead, I found myself entranced by what would become one of the most popular series in television history. *Roots*, based upon the book by Alex Haley, depicted the story of Kunta Kinte, a young African taken from his home and forced into slavery. I had learned about such things from school textbooks. I even knew that British and American ships loaded their hulls with men, women, and children to carry them across the ocean and sell them into servitude. But I had no conception of just how awful the experience was for its victims. *Roots* opened my eyes and angered my spirit.

I watched the formerly happy, playful Kinte caged like an animal. I remember scenes from the hull where he and others were packed side by side in unspeakable conditions, lying in their own filth day after horrific day. I will never forget one

INTRODUCTION

crew member trying to assuage the guilt feelings of his captain—a man who had never before carried human “cargo”—by saying it was better for heathen Africans to live in a “Christian” nation, even if they must be dragged off as slaves for the privilege. My stomach tightened and turned as I wondered who could possibly use such a flimsy argument to justify obvious evil. Many years later I would discover that John Newton, the same man who had penned one of my memorized hymns, ranked among those using such justification. In fact, John Newton had made his living as the captain of a British slave ship.

How could a man who participated in the capture and sale of fellow human beings—a man who transported men, women, and children in such awful conditions that many died en route—end up two centuries later listed in my blue hymnal as a celebrated Christian writer? Shouldn’t his sins against humanity have disqualified him from such recognition? What is the story behind such a remarkable dichotomy? Much of this book is dedicated to that story, and the God of amazing grace it reveals.

But we’ll also explore another story, one that may not have occurred without Newton’s direct influence: the story of a man named William Wilberforce.

Wilberforce, born thirty-four years after Newton, was the politician who led a twenty-year battle in Parliament to

outlaw the British slave trade. Now the subject of a powerful feature film, Wilberforce's story ranks among the most fascinating examples of God's intervention in the lives of ordinary, flawed people to accomplish His great work of human redemption. And, as we will discover, part of that great work includes a touching relationship between two eighteenth-century men—one a former slave-ship captain and the other, an influential British politician.

* * * * *

Redemption. What a beautiful word! The lost regained. The ruined restored. The sick healed. The broken repaired. The enslaved set free. It is a concept at the heart of Christian religion. God did not passively wait for us to get our act together after the Fall. Refusing to leave sinful, hurting humanity to wallow in its misery, He took the initiative, providing a means of redemption for His lost children and restoration for a damaged world.

Eighteenth-century Britain, the world into which Newton and Wilberforce were born, desperately needed the Almighty's intervention. A spiritual apathy and intellectually eviscerated religion had overtaken the church, leading many to abandon belief in God's direct involvement in human affairs. Sure, they still believed He had created the world and established certain guidelines. But only the "uneducated

INTRODUCTION

rabble” seemed to take such unsophisticated notions as personal sin, repentance, and salvation seriously. As a result, the church’s influence as a preserving salt diminished—leaving the poor and enslaved to suffer at the hands of uncaring, wicked men.

Into such a world an emerging movement now called “evangelicalism” was born. It began in the early 1730s on the campus of Lincoln College in Oxford when four young men began meeting together weekly to read the Greek New Testament and discuss the beliefs and practices of the early church. The movement—led by John and Charles Wesley—attracted the attention and loyalty of believers hoping to recover a religion that could inspire more than social pretense and Sunday yawns. The Wesleys, George Whitefield, and others gave birth to what has been called “The Great Awakening”—a revival of sincere belief and spiritual passion in England and America that prompted men and women from all walks of life to take the tenets of Christianity seriously, and as a result, to revolutionize their world.

Both John Newton and William Wilberforce embraced a particularly evangelical Christianity. Each experienced a radical conversion—one from the profane life of a slave-ship captain, the other from the skeptical arrogance of a wealthy sophisticate. Each believed in personal sin and repentance. And each considered God’s intervention in his life to include

purposes beyond personal salvation. It included the call to play some part in extending God's amazing grace to others in need of redemption.

As with earlier titles in our Finding God series, this book derives inspiration from specific scenes of a great story. Previously, we discovered the theology of writers like J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis bubbling up through their wonderful fantasy literature. In this edition, we explore how the real-life drama and writings of two great men provide insights for our own spiritual journeys. Just as the happenings of Middle-earth and Narnia reveal something of their creators, scenes from the lives of Newton and Wilberforce tell us something about the Author of history, and how His providential pen scripted scenes more intriguing than the most spectacular fiction.

We hope this book will not replace the experience of reading the actual writings or full biographies of Newton and Wilberforce. We simply wish to enhance appreciation and application of the truths that defined their influence. Each chapter opens by re-creating a scene that touches some aspect of God's intervention in and beyond their lives. While this exercise required some imaginative speculation, every chapter is inspired and informed by actual events from the lives and influence of John Newton and/or William Wilberforce.

INTRODUCTION

* * * * *

It has been nearly three decades since I sat in my small Baptist church and held that old blue hymnal. My new liturgy includes a modern projection system and simple choruses too easily remembered. But one old hymn has survived the ever-changing litany of church worship music. We continue singing it as a deeply embedded part of the evangelical ethos—a movement that invaded apathetic churches when they needed to move beyond personal comfort and reputation to rescue the victims of an unjust world. That song continues to remind us that God does indeed intervene in human affairs, redeeming the lost and rescuing the outcast. It is a song that, like the lives of Newton and Wilberforce, points us toward a God of Amazing Grace.



PART I



John Newton

*O Lord, truly I am Your servant;
I am Your servant, the son of
Your maidservant; You have
loosed my bonds.*

PSALM 116:16

MATERNAL GRACE



Little John Newton, six years old, hoisted himself up in his chair, leaned across the table, and stared out the parlor window at the sunlight dancing on the surface of the Thames. Away flew his thoughts, beyond the river and the estuary, over the wide world, to the dim and distant figure of his father, a stern-faced man in a merchant-captain's coat, cresting the blue Mediterranean swells at the wheel of his ship.

“What are God’s works of providence?”

John turned at the sound of his mother’s voice, gentle but

insistent at his side. A dog-eared copy of *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* lay open in her lap.

“What are God’s works of providence?” she repeated, glancing up at him.

The boy brushed the hair from his eyes. Then he blinked, rubbed his nose, and grinned. She gave him an encouraging nod.

“God’s works of providence,” he ventured, brightening beneath her smile, “are His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of all His creatures, and all their actions.”

“Good!” she beamed. “And what special act of providence did God exercise towards man in the estate wherein he was created?”

John bit his lip and frowned. “I’m sorry, Mother,” he said, his father’s grim and serious face flashing before his mind’s eye. “I guess I haven’t learned that one yet.”

“No matter,” she said, hooking a finger under his chin and lifting his face up to her own. “You shall learn it tomorrow! But can you remember the song we sang together yesterday?”

“Oh, yes!” he said, clapping his hands. “Let’s sing it again!”

She lifted him into her lap, and the fresh, clean smell of her white linen apron and blue taffeta skirts filled his nostrils. He snuggled close to her and they began:

Let children hear the mighty deeds which God performed of old;

JOHN NEWTON:
Maternal Grace

Which in our younger years we saw, and which our fathers told.

“Another!” he shouted when they had finished. “Can we sing another?”

“Why not?” she said, taking another book from the table—*The Hymns and Psalms of the Reverend Isaac Watts*. “Can you read this?” she asked, holding it up in front of him.

“O God,” he said, squinting at the page, “our Help in ages past, our Hope for years to come, Our Shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal Home.”

From somewhere on the street below came the laughter and shouts of neighborhood children. They were loud and exuberant at their play, but John never heard their calls. He was too full of the scent of his mother, too enraptured with the words of the song as it rose and fell on the gentle waves of her voice.

He was in his own personal heaven.

* * * * *

“If the foundations are destroyed,” says David in the eleventh Psalm, “what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11:3). It’s a question well worth pondering.

But suppose the foundations are *not* destroyed. Suppose that, on the contrary, they are laid deep in the hidden bedrock of the unchanging grace of God. Suppose that they are so well established and so painstakingly constructed that

they stand unshaken despite the ravages of time and tide and chance. What then?

In that case, the righteous can hope to do *all things* (Philippians 4:13). In that case, we can expect the blind to see, the lame to walk, and the dead to live again. Best of all, we can look forward to the happy spectacle of prodigals coming home to the house built firm upon the Rock.

The story of the Reverend John Newton is the story of a beloved son, errant blasphemer, slave of slaves, and preacher of the everlasting gospel. It's a story that ends well because it *begins* well—in spite of a bleak and disastrous “middle passage.”

We don't want to miss that good beginning. It's absolutely essential to everything that follows. Because for all its subsequent sordidness and sorrow, our narrative starts with a tender, touching scene: a child on his mother's knee, singing hymns and reciting verses from the Bible. An unlikely point of departure, perhaps, for a foul-mouthed sailor and a dealer in human flesh.

Elizabeth Newton, by her son's own account, was “a pious experienced Christian”¹—a woman whose life was built around a solid vertical core. She was a genuine believer whose *knowledge* of God went deeper than mere doctrinal orthodoxy and whose *experience* of the Savior's love was warm and immediate and inextricably interwoven with the details of everyday existence.

JOHN NEWTON:
Maternal Grace

That in itself simply *had* to rub off on young John. No doubt it would have even if his mother had never said a word to him about it. There is, after all, a great deal of truth in the old maxim that faith is more effectively *caught* than *taught*. But Mrs. Newton wasn't the kind to be content with such assurances. No; she personally directed every aspect of her son's education. She saw to it that the seeds of God's righteousness, truth, and mercy were planted deep in the soil of his soul from the earliest moments of childhood.

And so, almost from the time her son could speak, Mrs. Newton began to teach him. She took his training firmly in hand with enthusiasm, devotion, and fervent prayer. The results were impressive. At three her boy was already learning to read. By four he had practically mastered the skill. At five he was memorizing Scripture, enduring the rigors of the Catechism, and filling his mind with the words and melodies of the hymns of Isaac Watts. By six he was ready to embark on the study of Latin. And all because of the industry and care of a loving mother whose heart's desire was that her son might someday serve the Lord as a minister of the Word.

But then tragedy struck. Elizabeth died before John turned seven, the victim of her own weak constitution and the ravages of consumption (or tuberculosis), one of the deadliest and most feared maladies of the day. As a result, by the time John was twenty-one, his closest companions would

have been hard pressed to detect even the slightest traces of his mother's influence upon him. Among other things, anger at God over her death drove him to abandon the path she had taught him to tread. But that, as we shall see, wasn't to be the end of the story.

Though in young manhood, Newton did his level best to "sin away" every last vestige of these early impressions, he never fully succeeded. "They returned again and again," he tells us, "and it was very long before I could wholly shake them off; and when the Lord at length opened my eyes, I found a great benefit from the recollection of them."² In other words, Mrs. Newton's chickens eventually came home to roost.

The well-worn and oft-quoted words of Proverbs 22:6 immediately come to mind: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it." It is true, of course, that many godly parents have suffered greatly because of their wayward sons' and daughters' ill choices. As wise as this saying may be, it doesn't necessarily mean it's an unqualified promise or absolute guarantee. But neither should the life-giving principle it conveys be too easily dismissed. It does, after all, make a very real difference *how* a child is raised. Moses acknowledged this in his instructions to the people of Israel:

*And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.
You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them*

JOHN NEWTON:
Maternal Grace

when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. DEUTERONOMY 6:6-7

It needs to be said that, allowing for anomalies and departures from the rule, this kind of investment *generally* yields a rich dividend, a dividend that can manifest itself in surprising ways. Consider the case of young Samuel, whose course in life was fixed when his mother Hannah “lent him to the Lord” (1 Samuel I:28); or Timothy, whose “genuine faith . . . dwelt first in [his] grandmother Lois and [his] mother Eunice” (2 Timothy I:5). We know that God can use *anyone* or *anything* to draw hearts to Himself and prepare a pathway for His people. And yet there is no substitute for the tender affections of a godly mother. Newton himself felt this keenly: “[My father] was a man of remarkable good sense, and great knowledge of the world; he took great care of my morals, but could not supply my mother’s part.”³

“In the Torah,” observes Chaya Saskonin, a member of Brooklyn’s Lubavitch Jewish Community, “women are called *akeret ha-bayit*, the foundation of the home. That doesn’t mean washing dishes. It means educating our children in everything we think about life. That’s the nature of what a mother is.”⁴

And so it is. It’s also the nature of the God who made mothers; the God who weaves each one of us together in the womb (Psalm 139:13) and shelters us under His wings like a

brooding hen (Psalm 17:8; Matthew 23:37). This is the same God who, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, both gives and takes away; the God who granted John Newton an excellent parent for his early spiritual upbringing, only to remove her from his life at an unexpected hour. It seemed a cruel blow. But the upshot was that John, in the fullness of time, became “an unusual proof of His patience, providence, and grace.”⁵

No wonder they call that grace “amazing.”

M A T E R N A L G R A C E

In the beginning, there is grace.

PART II



William Wilberforce

*My grace is sufficient for you,
for my power is made perfect
in weakness.*

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9, NIV

SUFFICIENT GRACE



“I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord.”

The words seemed out of place to young William, a mere eight years old, as he watched the lips of a priest greeting his father’s casket at the door. Numb with an indifferent grief, William wondered why the opening lines of the service spoke of life when its purpose was to bury the dead.

“He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.”

Believe? Did his father believe? Of course, he must have. Would the church have hosted such an elaborate funeral

service for a man who rejected God? They must have known what William had observed: that his father had been a good man who led a good life.

“We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.”

Robert Wilberforce may have brought nothing into this world, but he had certainly been given a great deal upon arrival. The son of a successful merchant and renowned politician, he proudly traced his ancestry to King Henry II, the twelfth-century English monarch. So, while he may not have been able to bring anything with him to the next world, he did leave much behind for his young heir, William.

“The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Blessed? How could they say such a thing at a time like this? Did they really expect William to bless the name of a God who “hath taken away” his daddy—the only source of security, protection, and strength he had ever known? Forty years old is too young for a devoted husband and father to leave this life. Eight years old is too young to understand why God would allow such a thing.

His emotions numb from the shock and flurry of the days since learning of his father’s death, William did the best he could to take in the sights and sounds of the liturgy. An occasional phrase penetrated his wandering mind, most

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE:

Sufficient Grace

notably the priest's reading something from the ninetyeth Psalm about the Lord being "our refuge from one generation to another."

If anyone needed a refuge now it would be William's mother, Elizabeth. Losing her husband meant more than an empty bed and aching heart. It would also diminish something she had come to cherish: high society living. Having grown accustomed to the pampered life expected of a prominent merchant-class family, Elizabeth would find it more difficult to engage in lavish forms of entertainment without her beloved companion. The horse races, theatre, balls, and other such activities would lose much of their former appeal by triggering memories of happier days before Robert's death.

Faith would offer little real support. Hers was a religion more of show than substance. Despite a long association with notable Anglican clergy, including a relative who became the Archbishop of Canterbury, Elizabeth never held a strong personal faith, at least not the kind that would uphold her through so great a loss. She embraced religious ritual as part of a well-rounded life—more "Christian ethic" guiding social manners than "Christian redeemer" comforting the afflicted.

As the priest completed his homily from I Corinthians 15, William noticed the time had arrived for those assembled to move graveside. As pallbearers positioned the casket next to

the open hole in the ground, the priest and clerks sang in low, joyless tones words that seemed more fitting to the moment.

*Man that is born of a woman bath but a short
time to live, and is full of misery.*

He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; . . .

*O holy and most merciful Saviour, deliver us not into
the bitter pains of eternal death.¹*

William felt the wet splash of a tear on his hand. He looked over to see the white of his mother's fingers squeezing his own as the words "bitter pains" released a flood of emotions that, until this moment, had remained carefully guarded. He joined her, wiping his own moist eyes with the other hand while the men lowered his father to his final resting place.

"Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of our dear brother Robert Wilberforce here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

A few moments later, it was over. Well-wishers filed by William's mother as they left. Some made nice comments about Robert's legacy; most just touched her arm in reassuring support. Few even acknowledged William's presence or his pain. Only the priest's benediction offered any solace to a child stunned by sudden loss: "The grace of our Lord Jesus

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE:

Sufficient Grace

Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore. Amen.”

* * * * *

It seems strange to say that the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” was with young William Wilberforce. To take away an eight-year-old boy’s father hardly seems an act of kindness. Anyone who has lost a parent during childhood can attest to the lifelong influence of such devastation. Perhaps the loss made William more sympathetic to human suffering than might have otherwise been possible. After all, the common pattern of those who inherit wealth includes the pursuit of personal gratification rather than social concern. In fact, God warned the Israelites of this very tendency as they took possession of the Promised Land.

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper. When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.

Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God . . . lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver

and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

DEUTERONOMY 8:7-14

In this context God commanded His people to diligently teach their children to remember the Lord. They were a generation inheriting great wealth. Sadly, such blessing often unleashes a spirit of self-sufficiency and self-gratification rather than an appropriate concern for those less fortunate. For some reason, living in the lap of luxury tends to make us proud rather than humble, hoarding rather than generous, selfish rather than selfless.

This might have been the story of William Wilberforce had he not experienced the heart-softening cleaver of painful loss. Something in his childhood, possibly his father's untimely death, uniquely tempered this wealthy heir to move beyond self-gratification and social distinction to fill a role few were willing or able to accept.

Several other childhood experiences certainly contributed to Wilberforce's emerging character, including poor eyesight and a sickly disposition. Obstacles and irritations, certainly, but William did not allow either to become an excuse for inactivity. In fact, he was described as mentally and physically energetic. He played sports, suggesting a competitive spirit and force of will that enabled him to overcome hereditary dis-

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE:

Sufficient Grace

advantages. Again, physical limitations hardly seem a good gift from a gracious God. But grace appeared to be invading William's life in ways that, while unwelcome, may have been the very tools required to mold a potentially arrogant socialite into an instrument of divine providence.

William Wilberforce could probably relate to the apostle Paul who, while suffering his own physical challenges, perceived a special grace in the experience of suffering and pain. Paul asked the Lord to remove what he called his "thorn in the flesh" on three separate occasions; God finally answered—but not in the manner Paul had hoped.

And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 CORINTHIANS 12:9-10

The death of a father and physical weakness are just two of the tools God used to mold the spirit of this young boy. Left to the natural influences of inherited wealth and prominence, William Wilberforce might very well have become just another self-consumed playboy in British society, blissfully unconcerned about one of the greatest injustices of history.

S U F F I C I E N T G R A C E

Unwelcome pain is often God's perfecting instrument.

Afterthoughts



I, too, have fond memories associated with the hymn “Amazing Grace.” If I close my eyes and hum the melody, I can see myself, just sixteen or seventeen years old, sitting cross-legged on the floor of a crowded living room, singing with the gathered faithful until the walls and ceiling shake. I can revisit rallies in parking lots, concerts in gymnasiums, and marches for Christ down Hollywood Boulevard. I can go back to the Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and relive the excitement of tasting God’s amazing grace for the very first time.

But for all the poignancy of these personal reminiscences, there’s something else of which I’m keenly aware. Having encountered John Newton and William Wilberforce, I realize that I can never approach “Amazing Grace” in quite the same way again. Now that I’ve come to know the sailor who composed the hymn and the politician whose life was redirected under his wise and patient guidance, I will always hear echoes of *their* experiences of grace in this profound and simple song. Every time I sing it, I will in some sense be thinking of them: of their humility, their perseverance, their tireless devotion to the practical implications of the gospel story. I suppose my rambling verse-by-verse reflections will run something like this:

*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.*

When I remember Newton and Wilberforce, I will recall that “amazing grace” is something more than a theological concept in an ancient creed or a beautiful lyric in a beloved song. I will picture grace as a living and active force, a dynamic power with the potential to change lives and turn the world upside down. I will celebrate the grace that seeks the lost and saves the wretch, that gives sight to the blind and life to the dead. I will remind myself that everything I am and everything I have, I owe to the miracle of God’s amazing grace. *This*, as I see it, is the central message that sings through every verse of the song and every episode of the lives of John Newton and William Wilberforce.

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!*

When I ponder the sweet hour in which *I* first met Jesus Christ, I will remember that John Piper speaks of William Wilberforce’s conversion as “a great story of the providence

AFTER THOUGHTS

of God pursuing a person through seemingly casual choices.”¹ I will smile, thinking that the same can be said of Newton, provided we replace the phrase “seemingly casual choices” with “deliberate rebellion and reckless folly.” Most important, I will marvel at the realization that this same providence has been pursuing *me* and making its influence felt in *my* life since long before I had the sense to recognize it or call it by its rightful name. How precious indeed is the miracle of relentlessly seeking grace!

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

In one way or another, the life of faith is a struggle for each and every one of us. It's a long road beset with many dangers, toils, and snares. But the task, the goal, and the final homecoming are always one and the same; and the burden is light because we share the journey with those who came before and those who follow after. This, too, is a lesson I will bear in mind whenever I hear the words of “Amazing Grace.” For John Newton and William Wilberforce did not fight the good fight alone. The mercy they received and the successes they achieved were all part of a larger plan. Their role was to reap the harvest that the apostle Paul planted when he wrote,

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). They were following a path that was blazed in the wilderness when Jesus looked at the crowds and said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). And it was *grace* that led them home.

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

From now on when I sing “Amazing Grace” I will be thinking of Newton and Wilberforce and their unwavering confidence, not merely in the justness of their cause, but in the faithfulness of the God who called them to it. I will remember that it was their belief in the *goodness* of the Lord and the reliability of His promises that enabled them to press forward in the face of almost unbelievable tribulations and adversities. Their perseverance and determination to stick to the job, not only until the work was finished but “as long as life endures,” were not simply the distinguishing character traits of two unusually gifted men. Instead, this remarkable tenacity flowed directly from a firm conviction that, come what may, “grace would get the upper hand.”² How could it be otherwise when

AFTER THOUGHTS

they lived in the settled assurance that the everlasting Father was their strength and shield (Psalm 28:7)? How could they doubt it when *He* had pledged Himself to be their portion and inheritance forever (Psalm 73:26)?

*Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

And yet at last there came an end to all their labor and strife. This, too, is an aspect of God's amazing grace. For in a world like ours, where nothing is accomplished without pain and travail, where "the whole creation groans" under the effects of sin and the Fall (Romans 8:22-23), it is a mercy at length to lay our temporal toils and troubles aside. It is a blessing to finish the race and reach the end of the weary way—to follow in the footsteps of David the king, who, "after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep." (Acts 13:36). It is a gift of incomparable worth to know that beyond this veil of mortal flesh lies an eternity of joy and peace, a life of unending fulfillment, satisfaction, and repose in the presence of Him who has gone ahead of us to our Father's house. Surely this is what John Newton had in mind when, just a month before his death, he told a young friend,

It is a great thing to die; and when flesh and heart fail, to have God for the strength of our heart, and our portion forever: I know whom I have believed, and he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day.³

Wilberforce lived and died in the same expectation. As Lord Macaulay, composer of his epitaph, observed:

He died not unnoticed or forgotten by his country; the peers and commons of England, with the Lord Chancellor and the Speaker at their head, carried him to his fitting place among the mighty dead around, here to repose; till, through the merits of JESUS CHRIST, his only Redeemer and Savior, (whom, in his life and in his writings he had desired to glorify) he shall rise in the Resurrection of the just.⁴

This, then, is the triumphant chord I will hear ringing in my head every time I come to the fifth verse of John Newton's timeless hymn. I won't be able to sing these four lines without picturing Newton and Wilberforce at the gate of heaven, dropping their burdens at the Savior's feet. Whenever I hear the words "*a life of joy and peace,*" I will imagine them standing

AFTER THOUGHTS

there, lifting their eyes to the everlasting hills, basking in the accolades of the Master to whom they dedicated all their efforts. I will hear His voice as He beckons to them from the door: “Well done, good and faithful servant[s]; . . . Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matthew 25:21).

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound! I’ve always found it so. But it will be all the sweeter to me now that I’ve walked a mile with John Newton, the former servant of slaves, and William Wilberforce, the tireless and unassuming liberator of the oppressed. Having traveled with them for this short time, I will forever after sing their song in a new and different way. And I will strive to live in the hope that echoes through the sixth and final verse of Newton’s hymn:

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here below,
Will be for ever mine.*⁵

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Ware". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J".

Endnotes

Maternal Grace

¹ John Newton, introduction by Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 17.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 18.

⁴ Quoted in “A Faith Grows in Brooklyn,” by Carolyn Drake. *National Geographic*, February 2006.

⁵ Newton, Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 18.

Warning Grace

¹ Newton, Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 24–25.

² Ibid., 27.

³ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, Penn.: Christian Publications, Inc., 1982, 1993), 69.

⁴ Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972), 100.

⁵ Newton, Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 27.

⁶ John Newton, “On Dreaming,” *Olney Hymns*, #98.

⁷ John Newton, *Letters of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 81.

Restraining Grace

¹ Newton, Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 31.

² *Ibid.*, 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶ Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 145.

⁷ Quoted in *Out of the Depths* (the *Authentic Narrative* of John Newton revised and updated for today's readers), ed. Dennis R. Hillman (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003), 136.

Afflicting Grace

¹ Newton, Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 41.

² *Ibid.*, 34.

³ Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 28.

⁴ From Newton's epitaph, self-composed, which is inscribed on a marble plaque that hangs in the church of St. Mary Woolnoth, London. See Newton, Hillman, *Out of the Depths*, 158.

⁵ Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 29.

⁶ Newton, Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

Preserving Grace

¹ Newton, Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 46.

Endnotes

² Ibid., 42–43.

³ Ibid., 50.

⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁵ Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, Letter XVIII, 110.

Illuminating Grace

¹ Newton, Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 56.

² Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club/Ave Maria Press, 1989), 30.

³ Newton, Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 62.

Delaying Grace

¹ Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, 133.

² Newton, Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 75.

³ Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, 187.

Growing Grace

¹ Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, 13–28.

² Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song*, 61.

³ Ibid., 50.

⁴ Ibid., 49.

⁵ Hillman, Newton. *Out of the Depths*, 103; and Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Story*, 100.

⁶ Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, 25.

⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁸ Newton, Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 9.

We know that Newton particularly disliked the doctrine of “instantaneous and entire sanctification” that became popular at this time among some of the followers of John Wesley. See John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002), 66, note 63.

Long-Suffering Grace

¹ Richard Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*; cited in John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance*, 56.

² Ibid.

³ Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, 155.

⁴ Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song*, 87–88.

⁵ This fifth verse is not well known today, having been excluded from most modern hymnals.

⁶ Cecil in Piper, *The Roots of Endurance*, 57.

⁷ Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, 156.

Sufficient Grace

¹ Taken from the 1662 Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* used at that time. See <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/england.htm>, accessed August 31, 2006.

Intervening Grace

¹ Kevin Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 33.

Endnotes

² Ibid., 31.

³ Ibid., 35.

⁴ Ibid., 34.

Giftng Grace

¹ Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity*, 24.

² Oliver Warner, *William Wilberforce* (London: B. T. Batsford LTD., 1962), 25.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶ Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity*, 51.

⁷ Ibid., 53.

Changing Grace

¹ Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity*, 80.

² Philip Doddridge, *On the Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (New York: The American Tract Society, 1745), chapter I.

³ Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity*, 79.

⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁶ Ibid., 84.

Calling Grace

¹ Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity*, 88.

² Ibid., 89.

³ Ibid., 90.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 136–137.

⁶ Warner, *William Wilberforce*, 40.

Disturbing Grace

¹ Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionists*, www.brycchancarey.com, accessed June 15, 2006.

Persistent Grace

¹ Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity*, 132.

² Ibid., 133.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 136–137.

Generous Grace

¹ John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (Batavia, Ill.: Lion Publishing Corporation, 1977), 141.

² Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity*, 174.

Compelling Grace

¹ William Wilberforce, *Real Christianity* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1982), xii.

² Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 153.

³ Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 2.

⁴ Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 3–5.

⁵ Ibid., 5.

Endnotes

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹¹ Ibid., 146.

¹² Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 4.

¹³ Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity*, 228.

Afterthoughts

¹ John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance*, 124.

² Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song*, 87.

³ Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, 214–215.

⁴ From Wilberforce's epitaph, composed by Lord Macaulay; cited in David J. Vaughan, *Statesman and Saint* (Nashville: Highland Books/Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 113–115.

⁵ “When we’ve been there ten thousand years/Bright shining as the sun/We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise/Than when we’d first begun.” These lines, though much beloved by many singers of “Amazing Grace,” were not written by John Newton. They first appeared in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s influential antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and were formally inserted into the text of “Amazing Grace” by the hymn writer and publisher Edwin Othello Excell for the 1889 edition of R. A. Torrey’s *World Renowned Hymns*. See Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song*, 137–143.

Bibliography

John Newton

- Bruce, Michael, ed. *William Cowper (Everyman's Poetry Series)*. London: J. M. Dent, 1999.
- Cecil, Richard. *The Life of John Newton*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978.
- Hillman, Dennis R., and John Newton. *Out of the Depths*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003.
- Hindmarsh, Bruce, and John Newton. *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998.
- Newton, John. *Letters of John Newton*. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960.
- Piper, John. *The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002.
- Turner, Steve. *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song*. New York: Ecco/HarperCollins Publishers, 2002.
- Vaughan, David J. *Statesman and Saint: The Principled Politics of William Wilberforce*. Nashville: Highland Books/Cumberland House Publishing, 2002.

William Wilberforce

- Belmonte, Kevin. *Hero for Humanity: A Biography of William Wilberforce*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002.
- Carey, Brycchan. *British Abolitionists*. www.brycchancarey.com, 2001.

FINDING GOD IN THE STORY OF AMAZING GRACE

Doddridge, Philip. *On the Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*.
New York: The American Tract Society, 1745.

Pollock, John. *Wilberforce*. Batavia, Ill.: Lion Publishing
Corporation, 1977.

Warner, Oliver. *William Wilberforce*. London: B. T. Batsford LTD.,
1962.

Wilberforce, William. *Real Christianity*. Portland, Ore.: Multnomah
Press, 1982.