

One of the most popular hymns we sing in Christian Churches is “Amazing Grace,” where we sing “how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” It’s written from a personal perspective of John Newton, who felt like a wretch. He was living a life where God was far down the list of his priorities.

Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and wrote hymns and played a significant role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

John Newton's journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain after he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

Newton was the prototypical "bad boy." His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, "I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it. At times, he says "I pretended to talk of virtue," he wrote, "yet my

delight and habitual practice was wickedness." He espoused a "freethinking" rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.

Demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became depressed, considered suicide, and thought of murdering his captain. Traded to work on a slave ship, Newton says, "I was exceedingly wretched. . . . I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion."

In West Africa he partnered with a slave trader and negotiated with African chiefs to obtain slaves. Life was good, he recalled. "We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied."

One day on another ship, Newton was reading—casually, "to pass away the time"—an edition of Thomas à Kempis' classic book, "On the Imitation of Christ." He wondered, "What if these things were true?" Dismayed, he "shut the book quickly." Newton called himself a terrible "blasphemer" who had rejected God completely. But then, as Forrest Gump might say, God showed up.

That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, "The Lord have mercy on us!" Spending long hours at the ship's helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, "I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him."

In coming days, the New Testament story of the prodigal son particularly impressed him. He became convinced of the truth of Jesus' message and his own need for it. "I was no longer an atheist," he writes. "I was sincerely touched with a sense of undeserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dangers. . . . I was a new man."

Newton discovered that the "new man" would not become perfect.

Maturation would be a process.

After his dramatic experience at sea, Newton saw changes in his life. He attended church, read spiritual books, prayed, and spoke outwardly of his

commitment. But his faith and behavior would take many twists on the road toward maturity.

Newton set sail again on a slave ship, seeing no conflict between slaving and his new beliefs. Later he led three voyages as a slave-ship captain. Newton studied the Bible. He held Sunday worship services for his crew on board ship. Church services on a slave ship seems absolutely disgusting today. For, how could a dedicated Christian participate in slave trading? Newton, like many of his contemporaries, was still a work-in-progress. Slavery was generally accepted in his world as a pillar of British economy; few yet spoke against it.

However, It takes years for some to change. Others never do. A biographer of Newman observed that “in 1751, Newton's spiritual conscience "was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and human slavery were irreconcilable.”

Two days before he was to embark on his fourth slave-trading voyage as ship's captain, a mysterious illness temporarily paralyzed Newton. His doctors advised him not to sail. The replacement captain was later

murdered in a shipboard slave uprising. And not too long after this, he began to change and speak out against slavery.

Out of the slave trade, Newton became a prominent public official in Liverpool. He attended Christian meetings and grew in his faith. Life still brought temptations. Newton engaged in the common practice of accepting kickbacks until a business ethics pamphlet by Methodism founder John Wesley prompted him to stop, at significant loss of income.

Eventually, Newton sought to become an ordained minister, and then he would significantly impact a young Member of Parliament who would help rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character, William Wilberforce.

William Wilberforce was a rising star in Parliament and seemed destined for political greatness. As a child he had often heard John Newton speak but later rejected the faith. As an adult, conversations with a Cambridge professor had helped lead him to God. He considered leaving Parliament and entering the ministry. In 1785, he sought the advice of his old pastor, Newton.

Newton advised Wilberforce not to leave politics. "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing, both as a Christian and as a statesman," Newton later explained. His advice proved pivotal. Wilberforce began attending Newton's church and spending time with him privately. Newton became his mentor.

It was after spending a day with Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade. During the arduous abolition campaign, Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel, who, Newton said, "trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him."

Newton's biblical worldview had matured to the point that he became active in the abolition movement. In 1788, he published a widely circulated pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me," he wrote, "that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders." His pamphlet detailed horrors of the slave trade and argued against it on moral and practical grounds.

Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament.

Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker. It took many years, but Newton not only found God who had been trying to find him, but he helped millions to begin to see the truth about how others should be treated.

His story goes to show you that grace is, indeed, amazing. But what it also shows us is that God never stops seeking us out, for as God was looking for Newton, and Zacchaeus, so He is looking for us. On our part, we need to just open up our hearts and souls and let God in entirely (not just part of the way) and, like Newton, respond to that grace by doing amazing things with it.

For a final exam one year in our class “Theological Anthropology,” which looked at the nature of man’s existence and how we relate to God and God’s presence among us, one of the essay questions was “Describe what is wrong with the hymn ‘Amazing Grace.’ It’s a lovely hymn, and it’s in our rotation at Masses (though I believe we are using Randy Newman’s ‘Short People’ tonight to tie it in to the Gospel and Zacchaeus), but one of the issues with it is that word “wretch.” It was written from the perspective of a man who felt like a wretch because of the choices he had made. But listen to the words from our first reading from Wisdom:

“For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned. And how could a thing remain, unless you willed it”

God does not need us for His happiness. Rather God creates out of love, which is to simply will the good of the other.

The point is because something exists, it is loved. God is not just the unseen creator who caused a big bang years ago. Rather, God creates out of love and will never forget us. As a mother could never forget her child, the words from Isaiah and the popular hymn “Though the Mountains May Fall,” God never forgets us. As such, we are not a wretch at all. We are loved; and sometimes we do wretched things like Newton, but even people who have not found God have moments where they do good things. God

sees both our wretchedness, but our goodness - and so He is always seeking us out wanting us to become entirely good, which is a process.

That is the second part, the ongoing conversion. Newton's journey was not just a single, "come to Jesus" moment. Rather it took time. And so it is with us. CS Lewis had the image of a house and letting God in, and sometimes when we have company over we keep them in the living room and dining room, but there are parts of the house they aren't invited in. We can't do that with God though. The problem is in our lives, it can be so easy to draw the blinds if you will on parts of our souls or spiritual houses that aren't in order. God gives us a conscience which we are meant to form, and how easy it can be to gradually become Zacchaeus, and just kind of live with our own poor choices and become blind to them. He's a chief tax collector; despised for turning his back on his own people and living off of what he skims off the top, something Newton was doing too. Perhaps he said to himself well I have to make a living, at least I'm not killing anyone, or doing any other big sins, there are worse people in the world than me. So it is with us. We are not a wretch, but we can do wretched things as I said. We make poor choices; we say well this is OK or not that big of a deal when the truth is it is a big deal, because our bad choice is impacting us and

other people, and turning us into someone we don't want to become. Hence the shortness detail; obviously there's nothing wrong with being short (and in fact Randy Newman said he wrote his famous song from the perspective of a bigot trying to show how ridiculous it would be to not like someone based on height), but the detail is there to show how he is spiritually short. He started doing things he shouldn't have, and it's snowballed so he's become comfortable doing these things. How much that happens to us; pick your sin, they start out small and grow or become present in our lives, and our response can be to draw the blinds or close the door on that part of our soul. This is where we have to remember God is seeking us out; He makes the move and says "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house." Jesus is inviting Himself in, and does the talking. And what does Zacchaeus do? He opens the door. Not just part way, but he lets Jesus in. So must it be with us. Make peace with your shadows. Listen to your conscience. Look at your life and ask yourself what's not right. Maybe you are doing something and saying ah, no big deal, no one knows, it's not a problem, but deep down you know this is impacting who you are, it's impacting others, and preventing you from being the person you want to be. And do not look at it with shame, but

know God wants to be in your house and let Him in. Ask for His help and mercy. Go to confession. Know you are loved and forgiven.

And then the last part: the ongoing conversion. Listen to what Zacchaeus says:

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over."

Like Newton who years later became an agent for change and started doing good, we have to take the steps forward too. It means recognizing we may fall back into that which we are trying to liberate ourselves from, so praying often and seeking out God's mercy time and again. It means looking at our sins and saying what causes me to do that and getting rid of certain things in our lives. It means going out into this world and being an agent of change; working on being the kind of spouse, parent, family member, and person that God knows we are capable of becoming. It means filling this world with love. It means using our past mistakes and helping others who maybe struggled with what we did to make better choices. And this would be probably another issue with the song - if you are blind and see, you have to use grace to not only change yourself, but to change the world through acts of good, which we can do when we put

God's love into action. The world has many problems, but when we act as agents of good using God's grace, what an impact we can make like Newton did.

There is no getting around the fact that sin is ugly. And in our lives we so often either ignore it, or just learn to live with it - both the sins we commit and the sins of others. How about if instead of that we open up our eyes and look to our God who did something about it? Who created us out of love, knowing we would make bad choices at times, but sees the good in all of us, and wants to come to us to set us free. Let God's love set you free, and use it to help others find true freedom.