

Amazing Grace – the story behind the hymn

From Sailor to Slave Trader

Author of the hymn, John Newton, was born in London in 1725. His mother taught him about the Bible and faith when he was young, but she died when he was only seven. His father, a sea captain, sent him to boarding school after remarrying.

Newton's life took a dark turn as he joined the slave trade. He worked on slave ships and later became a captain, transporting slaves from Sierra Leone, Africa, to the West Indies, where the slaves worked on sugar and coffee plantations.

During this time, he was known for his bad behaviour. He drank heavily and used language so foul it shocked even hardened sailors.

The Storm That Changed Everything

While sailing on his ship, *The Greyhound*, Newton faced a terrible storm in the north Atlantic. For over a week, the storm battered the ship, causing serious damage and leaving the crew hopeless.

In this desperate moment, Newton began to think about his life and his need for God. He cried out for mercy. While reading the New Testament, he found Luke 11:13: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him."

This verse spoke deeply to him. Newton later wrote about this day as the moment God's amazing grace reached him.

Writing 'Amazing Grace'

After leaving the slave trade and becoming a minister, Newton wrote 'Amazing Grace' to share his faith journey. The lyrics tell of redemption, forgiveness, and the life-changing power of faith in Jesus.

Newton says that he was lost, but speaks of being found by God. He tells us how his eyes were opened to God's love.

When he wrote, "T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear, and Grace, my fears relieved; How precious did that Grace appear, the hour I first believed," Newton was describing his journey from guilt to peace through God's love.

Newton's Legacy

Having fully realised the horrors and atrocities that he had been involved in, Newton became heavily involved in campaigning for the abolition of the slave trade.

After finding faith, Newton fought against the slave trade alongside William Wilberforce. Their work helped pass the British Slave Trade Act in 1807, which ended slave trading in the British Empire.

Newton spent the rest of his life as a minister and wrote many hymns still sung today. He died in 1807, the same year the slave trade was abolished in Britain.

'Amazing Grace' continues to inspire people worldwide. It has been translated into many languages and recorded by countless musicians. Its message of hope reminds us that God's grace can reach and transform anyone, no matter how far they've strayed.

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.

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

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

Activities

1. What do you think were some key factors in Newton's conversion to Christianity?
2. Why do you think Newton chose to use the word 'wretch' in the second line of verse 1?
3. Although this hymn is a very personal response to Newton's own life, explain how this has application to all people, in the light of Romans 3:23.
4. Draw a time line of John Newton's life, indicating the key events.
5. What major reform was Newton involved in?
6. Who did he work with in this work?
7. How has did work impact the world?
8. Research and give evidence of a 'slave trade' still in operation today.

