

Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound
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Psalm 8

- ¹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
- ² Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
- ³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
- ⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
- ⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
- ⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
- ⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
- ⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
- ⁹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

1 Chronicles 17:16-17

¹⁶Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and said, “Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? ¹⁷And even this was a small thing in your sight, O God; you have also spoken of your servant’s house for a great while to come. You regard me as someone of high rank, O LORD God!

John Newton, our hymn’s author, was born July 24, 1725 in a suburb of London “that thrived on shipping and sea trade.”¹ His father was a sea captain, often gone for two to three years at a time. His mother died of tuberculosis when he was seven. In those short seven years, she tried her best to instill in him a deep and abiding faith but to no avail. For a while after his mother’s death, Newton stayed with his new stepmother, who didn’t care to have him around, was content to let him wander the streets and who didn’t enforce any discipline. At eleven, Newton went to work on his father’s ship, serving on six voyages with his father until the time of his retirement.² His father was no better influence on the young John, who became known not only for his foul mouth but also for his derision of believers and his

¹ <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ahas/loc.natlib.ahas.200149085/default.html>

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/pastorsandpreachers/newton.html>,
http://www.anointedlinks.com/amazing_grace.html

intentional efforts to break their faith.

An article from Christianity Today offers a tidy summary of his time at sea. In 1744, while on shore, he was press-ganged aboard the H.M.S. Harwich... Newton rebelled against the discipline of the Royal Navy and deserted. He was caught, put in irons, and flogged. He eventually convinced his superiors to discharge him to a slaver ship. Espousing freethinking principles, he remained arrogant and insubordinate, and he lived with moral abandon: 'I sinned with a high hand,' he later wrote, 'and I made it my study to tempt and seduce others'

He took up employment with a slave-trader named Clow... He was treated cruelly by Clow and the slaver's African mistress; soon Newton's clothes turned to rags, and Newton was forced to beg for food to allay his hunger.

The sluggish sailor was transferred to the service of the captain of the Greyhound... in 1747, and on its homeward journey, the ship was overtaken by an enormous storm. Newton had been reading Thomas a Kempis's [sic] *The Imitation of Christ*, and was struck by a line about the 'uncertain continuance of life.' He also recalled the passage in Proverbs, 'Because I have called and ye have refused,... I also will laugh at your calamity.' He converted during the storm, though he admitted later, 'I cannot consider myself to have been a believer, in the full sense of the word.'³

It is this experience which inspired the hymn. The second verse makes it clear. "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, / And grace my fears relieve'd; / How precious did that grace appear, / The hour I first believ'd!"

With slavery widely approved, even among Christians at that time, Newton did not feel compelled to stop working in slave trading. However, as he continued on as mate and eventually captain, he hoped "as a Christian to restrain the worst excesses of the slave trade, 'promoting the life of God in the soul' of both his crew and his African cargo."⁴

In 1755, Newton's health forced him off the seas. Nine years later, he sensed a call to ministry, was ordained, and was offered a parish in Olney. "Three years after Newton arrived, poet William Cowper moved to Olney."⁵ Cowper and Newton became good friends and Cowper helped Newton in his ministry. For worship services, "Newton often composed a hymn which developed the lessons and Scripture for the evening. In 1779, two hundred and eighty of these were collected and combined with sixty-eight hymns by... Cowper, and published as the *Olney Hymns*."⁶

In its original form, the hymn was different from what we sing in two ways. Neither is particularly surprising, if you've been here for any of the other sermons on hymns. First, there were two different verses in place of what we sing as the final verse. Instead of "When we've been here ten thousand years," Newton wrote:

³ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/pastorsandpreachers/newton.html>

⁴ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/pastorsandpreachers/newton.html>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <http://www.christianity.com/ChurchHistory/11630253/>

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.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who call'd me here below,
Will be forever mine.

Newton is quoted as saying near the end of his life, "My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior."⁷

It is these words of his which most remind me of Psalm 8, a favorite of mine. "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." It is humbling to think, of all the amazing things this world has, *we* have been made in God's image. A woman whose blog I read, mostly about being gluten-free but all written with great poetry, wrote of a visit to Mt. Rainier saying, "We just stood under that enormous mountain and felt properly small again."⁸ Properly small. When was the last time you felt properly small, properly small in comparison to God's creation? And yet marveling at the love, care, and esteem God has for you? I can't tell you the year but I can describe the situation. I was at O'Hare Airport, offering a prayer for something I don't recall, when I was suddenly struck by the idea that God not only heard my prayer but the prayers of anyone else there at O'Hare. That realization grew to encompass people at airports all over the world, and the people whom they were going to see, and then, all the millions of people they would never meet. God heard, and hears, each of us, listening as if we were the only ones. I was humbled. I remain humbled. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

King David put it this way, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" We would consider John Newton a wretch. For having Bathsheba's husband killed, we would consider David a wretch. We might even consider ourselves wretches. But God sees beyond our foolish actions and bad choices. God regards us as "someones" of high rank. And if we realize this, even in momentary glimpses, then the words of the hymn speak to us: "I once was lost, but now am found, / Was blind, but now I see."

I mentioned that this song we sing is not the same as the song as it was written, for two reasons. The second reason is that the tune that we can identify in two notes, or even one, is not the tune originally

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <http://glutenfreegirl.com/all-in-a-row/>

married to the hymn. A custom of the time was to pair up songs with tunes based on their meter, so one song could be sung many, many ways. The tune we know, “New Britain,” also known as “Amazing Grace,” wasn’t linked to *Amazing Grace* until 60 years after its writing in 1772. A man named William Walker put the song in his *Southern Harmony* hymn book and paired it with the tune we know in 1832.⁹ Even one hundred years later, though, different tunes were still being used by different people in different places. In the Library of Congress’ attempts to capture the local variations of this, and other long-used songs, they “sent collectors into the field first with wax cylinder recorders, then instantaneous disc recorders.”¹⁰ In describing the mixing of lyric with a variety of tunes from one particular captured recording, it was written, “In this performance a printed version is adapted to a local aesthetic. The exchange demonstrates the complex interplay of popular culture represented by a commercially printed hymnal and folk traditions represented by a melody sung from memory - one of several melodies that could have been performed.”¹¹

It is this adaptability and universality of this song which have made it, inarguably, one of the best known and widespread songs. Who among us cannot relate? “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.” We have not been abducted for work on a Royal Navy ship or mistreated and abused by a slave trader and his mistress but we *have* experienced our own dangers, toils, and snares. You know what yours are - I don’t need to name them for you. And, like Newton, we might say that we are great sinners.

But that is never the final word! Christ is a great Savior! God has made us but a little lower than God. And we know through Christ and the whole of the Bible that God’s Word provides us with hope through it all, that God will be both our shield and portion through it all. For that, for God’s amazing mercy and protection and love and accompaniment through it all, it is so good and so right to sing God’s praise. And it is humbling to know that God’s goodness is so great that we would still have praises to sing ten thousand years from now. With humility, with proper smallness, let us then begin to sing God’s praise as we stand to sing hymn 280, *Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound*.

⁹ <http://www.christianhistorymagazine.org/index.php/past-pages/81amazing-grace/>

¹⁰ <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ih/loc.natlib.ih.200149008/default.html>

¹¹ Ibid.