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Reflections on 250 Years of "Amazing Grace"

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Reflections on 250 Years of "Amazing Grace" Tyler Johnson Mon, 11/20/2023 - 01:22 On New Year's Day 1773, John Newton preached from 1 Chronicles 17:16-17. It was during this message that Newton introduced to his congregation a special song—arguably the most well-known hymn of all time—"Amazing Grace." In 2023, some two-hundred fifty years since "Amazing Grace" was first sung, the message of God's grace is still powerfully ministering through this hymn to people all over the world. But why? Why has "Amazing Grace" resonated within the hearts of so many since its writing? Deliverance from Spiritual Darkness You may know that the lyrics to "Amazing Grace" were birthed out of personal testimony. When Newton was just six years old, he lost his mother to tuberculosis, and at only eleven years of age, he joined his father at sea. In years to come, Newton's life took a sharp downward trajectory as he participated in the slave trade, transporting people from the African continent. It was during a particularly stormy journey from Africa to Europe in 1748 that Newton, fearing for his life, began reading the Scriptures and contemplating his faith in God in an attempt to find some comfort for his soul. Although his mother had died early in his life, she had instilled in his heart a scriptural foundation that John remembered then, even within the darkness of the slave trade. God did rescue Newton and the entire crew in that storm. But more significantly, it was through this experience that Newton placed his faith in Christ as his Savior. Newton eventually rejected the ills of the slave trade and became a respected voice in his day against the evils of slavery. Ultimately, he pursued a ministry life in the small English town of Olney. It was in Olney that Newton worked together with his friend William Cowper to produce the well-known collection Olney Hymns. It was in this book that "Amazing Grace" was first published. The song "Amazing Grace" was birthed against the backdrop of the personal testimony of John Newton and God's great salvation from sin. Light is more readily appreciated in contrast with darkness. Goodness is seen more vibrantly in the face of evil. The beauty of God's grace is demonstrated more dramatically against the ugliness of sin. Shortly before Newton's death, he said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior." On Newton's tombstone is the following inscription: "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy." Delivery of Scriptural Doctrine Scriptural worship always begins with properly understood truth. Truth ought to be the driver of our affections and should generate a response within the heart and life of the believer. These responses—whether of praise, surrender, giving, or serving—are the sacrifices of worship we offer to God. The essential nature of truth in our worship is seen in Jesus' words in John 4:24, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." It is the beautiful communication of truth in "Amazing Grace" that has made it resonate so deeply in the hearts of Christians over the centuries. We sing in this hymn the wonderful realities we as Christians hold dear: the depth of our sin; the richness of Christ's grace and love; the comfort of God's presence, goodness, and care in our lives; and the ultimate hope for the believer in Heaven with God for all of eternity. The truths expressed in "Amazing Grace" are ultimately a reminder of the unlimited reach of God's grace in our salvation. This is reminiscent of the apostle Paul's encouragement in 1 Corinthians 6:11: "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." Intergenerational Timelessness of Truth Great songs are not relegated to a specific time period. In fact, wonderful and doctrinally rich songs communicating truth from God's Word can and are being written today. Even so, I am appreciative of the heritage that we as believers have in many great songs of the faith. One of the enduring values of a hymn like "Amazing Grace" is that it appropriately and excellently expresses truth about Who our God is, what He has done and desires to do, and what He has given us in Scripture. When we as believers understand these truths and the immeasurable value of our personal relationship with God, our hearts overflow with a desire to sing praise to God. There is great beauty in multiple generations participating in singing corporately to the Lord. "Amazing Grace" contains timeless truth through which both the old and the young, the time-tested Christian and the new believer, and those of any and all cultural and ethnic backgrounds can participate in worshipping the Lord. Isn't that the heart of God's grace? God loved the world (John 3:16, Ephesians 2:4-5, 1 John 4:10), He gave His Son for the world (Luke 19:10, John 1:17, John 3:16), He extends His grace to the world (Luke 19:10, 2 Corinthians 8:9, Ephesians 2:4-9), and He desires "that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:17, Romans 5:8-11, 2 Peter 3:9). May our hearts rest in and be refreshed by His amazing grace, and may we be encouraged to share the story of God's grace with the world! Editor's note: To hear a special 250-year anniversary arrangement of "Amazing Grace," performed by the West Coast Baptist College Choir and directed by Tyler Johnson, click here. 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