

# AMAZING

# Grace

The depth of a hymn

Josh Elliott Photography/lightstock.com

**A FEW YEARS AGO, OUR CHURCH FAMILY (HOWICK BAPTIST CHURCH) EMBARKED ON A PROJECT OF MEMORIZING TEN HYMNS. WHY ON EARTH WOULD A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHURCH BOTHER TO COMMIT OBSCURE WORDS LIKE, "BULWARK," "EBENEZER," AND "QUICKENING RAY" TO MEMORY? WELL FOR A START, IN A WORLD WHERE NEW IS BETTER (AND EVEN WHAT'S NEW BECOMES OBSOLETE PRETTY QUICKLY), THESE HYMNS REMIND US THAT THE CHRISTIAN FAITH WASN'T INVENTED YESTERDAY AND THAT THERE IS MUCH TO LEARN FROM THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US. HERE'S A FEEBLE ATTEMPT AT DRAWING OUT, AS ONE PASTOR PUT IT, THE "STUBBORN AND ILLOGICAL LOVE OF JESUS":<sup>1</sup> WHICH INSPIRED MEN AND WOMEN TO WRITE THESE HYMNS AND KEEPS US SINGING THEM TODAY.**



We've all heard the famous line, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound..." It's been sung at weddings, funerals, sporting events, ANZAC Day dawn ceremonies, and memorial services. Young and old, spiritual and agnostic alike are deeply moved by this classic hymn. Numerous books use the familiar title *Amazing Grace*, as well as the powerful movie about William Wilberforce, a politician who loved Jesus and ardently fought to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire. So it may surprise you

to know that the author, John Newton, originally titled the hymn "Faith's Review and Expectation." Also, he never sang it to the tune we're most familiar with today (the tune "New Britain" was introduced in a hymnal about 100 years later). And to bust another popular myth, John Newton didn't come up with this song while caught in a storm on a slave ship. Rather, he wrote this hymn to go alongside a New Year's Day sermon that he preached at his English country church in 1773, a sermon based on the text of 1 Chronicles 17: 16-17. John Newton's sermon notes that morning included these words: "Blinded by the god of this world. We had not so much a desire of deliverance. Instead of desiring the Lord's help, we breathed a spirit of defiance against him. His mercy came to us not only undeserved but undesired. Yea [a] few [of] us but resisted his calls, and when he knocked at the door of our hearts endeavoured to shut him out till he overcame us by the power of his grace."<sup>2</sup>

*The solution to our anxiety is not growing in self-confidence, but growing in Christ-confidence.*

Let's take a closer look at this hymn.

*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.*

*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.*

The first two verses invite us to reflect on the hope that Christ brings: on the cross, Jesus Christ was made a wretch to save those who were lost in sin - like John Newton, like you and me. Newton words it beautifully: "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." We get so tangled up in today's worries, that we often forget to take a step back and remember God's grace to us in Jesus. The day you first believe in this amazing grace is precious - don't forget it! The rest of the verses bring to

mind future hope from a Christian perspective. Every follower of Christ can trust him to protect and provide for us, and to carry us through difficult times. But how do we believe this when we're filled with doubts and uncertainties? These verses remind us that the solution to our anxiety is not growing in self-confidence, but growing in Christ-confidence. We have a secure hope in God's good and gracious character, revealed to us in his Word. So be encouraged! The same grace that's brought us safely to where we are now is the same grace that will continue until we are safely home in an eternity with Christ, where faith becomes sight and all our tears are wiped away by him. Here are some ideas to help you reflect further, either personally or with your church family:

- Read the Apostle Paul's own review of God's grace in Ephesians 2: 1-10, then respond with this hymn.
- Do what John Newton did and sing this song on New Year's Day. Reflect as King David did in 1 Chronicles 17: 16: "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?"
- Sing Chris Tomlin's arrangement "Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone)." It suits contemporary bands, and the additional chorus makes the gospel more explicit.
- Sing "Amazing Grace" immediately following a newer song celebrating God's grace (You could try "Grace Alone" by Dustin Kensrue, or "Scandal of Grace" by Hillsong United). The switch between ancient and modern helps to cast God's grace in a fresh light.
- Pair some of the words to the tune of Matt Redman's "10,000 Reasons." Sometimes mixing up the familiar helps us to take note of what we are singing about! I also love Redman's emphasis on the fact that one day we won't get tired of praising God for his amazing grace!

Hopefully the next time you sing this hymn, these words will resonate even more strongly with you.

**Story:** William

William is a member of Howick Baptist Church, currently studying an MDiv at Sydney Missionary Bible College.

1. Dale Campbell, "Good old church songs iii," Assorted Music, 2012, [dalecampbell.bandcamp.com/album/good-old-church-songs-iii](http://dalecampbell.bandcamp.com/album/good-old-church-songs-iii)
2. John Newton, "Amazing Grace: The Sermon Notes," The John Newton Project, 2000, [johnnewton.org/Groups/32665/The\\_John\\_Newton/archive/Amazing\\_Grace/The\\_sermon\\_notes/The\\_sermon\\_notes.aspx](http://johnnewton.org/Groups/32665/The_John_Newton/archive/Amazing_Grace/The_sermon_notes/The_sermon_notes.aspx)

## Take outs...

1. How does your church balance learning from those who have gone before us, and those bringing new understanding?
2. Take a fresh look at the words of this hymn. What might God be saying to you through them?
3. Which of the ideas given here might you use next time you sing this hymn?
4. We'll be bringing you some more insights from hymns like this one in 2017. Keep an eye on the discipleship section of [baptistmag.org.nz](http://baptistmag.org.nz).