

“Amazing Grace”

The word ‘blessing’ in Greek can refer both to an act of thanksgiving or praise and to an act of bestowing some gift on another. In the scripture reading the double meaning causes us to think about how God is to be blessed for God’s blessings.

Ephesians 1:3-14

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to praise of his glory.

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Ephesians 1:14

Philip Yancey begins the fourth chapter of his book, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* with this story about C.S. Lewis. *During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room. “What’s the rumpus about?” he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”* (p. 45).

Grace comes from the Greek word *charis* which means “to rejoice, I am glad”. In Christian thought grace refers to a free, unmerited, and unearned good gift that comes from God. Often, special emphasis is put on the grace of God as given in Christ Jesus. In his appeal for unity among the members at Ephesus, St. Paul gave thanks for the grace of the Holy Spirit who creates a holy and blameless people before God; who adopts us as beloved children through Christ; who blesses us with redemption, forgiveness, wisdom, faith; who calls us to praise and thanksgiving rather than repayment of a debt.

Some would call grace amazing. That’s how John Newton, captain of a slave trading vessel described grace one night when a violent storm hit his vessel. Moments after leaving the deck the crewman who had taken his place was swept overboard. After returning to his

post Newton had an experience of helplessness and a conversion of faith in which he believed that only the grace of God could save him.

The kind of amazing grace that Newton described as saving a "wretch" like him is known in traditional Christian theology as Divine grace. Divine grace can broadly be defined as God's empowering presence in a human being's life which enables a soul to be and become the person their Creator intended. Divine grace is an indispensable gift of power which is sufficient for the soul to progress in its journey toward holiness (becoming a reflection of the image of God). Divine grace is the Self-giving of God's life and love for the development, improvement, and completion of our soul's character. In our tradition we affirm the work of Divine grace as we sing, "In the bulb there is a flower only God alone can see."

After his conversion experience at sea John Newton started reading Thomas a Kempis' spiritual classic, *Imitation of Christ*. In those pages he found words of Christian faith that resonated with his stormy night of baptism and his human condition. Divine grace, he realized, was about God loving people because of who God is and not because of who we are, sinners. He learned that grace means that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more---and grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. Newton discovered the grace of forgiveness of Christ which healed his human limitations, weaknesses, flaws, impurities and faults that kept him from loving God, self, and others.

Shortly after his marriage to Mary Catlett and immersion into spiritual readings on Christ, Newton was struck by another aspect of Divine grace. This time, grace taught his heart to sing. In response to what God had done for him he taught the sailors on his ship how to pray. He began treating the "human cargo" under his care as captain

of a slave trading vessel with gentleness and concern. Later, grace visited him again. After being struck down with a stroke that ended his slave trading career at sea, Newton felt a call to explore Christianity more fully as an ordained clergy. While preparing a sermon born from his conversion experience and the portion of scripture from 1 Chronicles 17:16-17 in which King David marveled at God's choosing of him and his house for service to the Lord . . . The Holy Spirit, bearing witness to the self giving grace of God gave birth to the lyrics of the gospel song ---Amazing Grace.

Forty years after his conversion at sea the Holy Spirit empowered Newton with another gift of Divine grace. By the grace of Christ, Newton challenged the trafficking of slaves. Armed with the grace of courage from Christ and transformed by the prophetic wisdom of Jesus, he led a fight to end the ungodly slave trading business.

In the Sacrament of Baptism the church celebrates the gift of Divine Grace. *In Christian Baptism we receive the call to maturity, the call to holiness, the call to community, the call to service, and the call to generosity* (reconciliation by Robert Morneau, p. 34). Shortly, Adrien Aeron will be named a Beloved child of God. Through the loving care of his parents, in the promises of this community of faith, and by the power of the Holy Spirit he will begin his soul's journey of becoming the human being God intends him to be . . . forgiven, grown in love, and transformed into holiness by the grace of Jesus Christ. Amazing grace---how sweet is the sound! Amen.