

## Lift Every Voice

When I started planning this series, I decided to keep the best for last! There were six or seven cards submitted, and three of them had *Amazing Grace* on them. Prayerfully considering the hymns, how they all fit together, and Scriptures that connected them required a lot of time and thought. And then looking into the stories of the hymnists and the histories of the songs – it has been a labor of love and personally very rewarding!

In your bulletins this morning, you'll find an index card. I'd like to launch another series, based on more modern praise and worship music the week after the Gideon speaker comes. The card is for you to fill out, drop in the offering box, and let me know some of your favorite modern day praise and worship songs. Make sure you tell me who sings them, so I can find the correct song, and I can look at the lyrics to figure out what Scriptures they tie into.

If you can't think of something this morning off the top of your head, take the card with you, and bring it back next week. We've got about four weeks before we'll start this new series. Now with all this being said, as you're thinking song-wise, we're talking Christian music from Christian artists. I know *Stairway to Heaven* by Led Zeppelin has a great tune and it's pretty singable, but we aren't going to hear it in here.

## Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me

The first song we sang this morning, *Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me*, was written by Augustus Toplady in 1776. Toplady was an Anglican priest who was at theological odds with John and Charles Wesley. At the time, Calvinist theology was making great inroads in the Church of England – the idea of people being completely morally depraved is a Calvinist idea. John and Charles Wesley believed that it was possible for a faithful follower of Jesus Christ to attain a state of Christian perfection while they were still living here on earth. Basically, the Wesleyan idea of Christian perfection is that we become so close to Jesus, that we live without consciously sinning.

Toplady originally wrote the hymn as a rebuttal to the Wesley brothers. There's also an old story related to this song, that Toplady was on a walk through the English countryside one Sunday afternoon, when dark clouds started to gather overhead. He found a ledge between towering boulders and took refuge between them while the storm raged. The words came to him while he was sheltered from the storm. Toplady died, aged 38, from tuberculosis. We heard earlier in the Old Testament lesson that Moses was put in the cleft of the rock while God passed by. I want to look at another Scripture passage this morning, and talk about some other hymns that show how we take refuge in Jesus. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Ephesians 2:1-10. **Read Ephesians 2:1-10.**

The Apostle Paul doesn't mince words to the people at the church in Ephesus. He tells them – and us – the truth about ourselves. “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient,” (Eph. 2:1-2). In the first couple verses, Paul talks about this “ruler of the kingdom of the air,” and “the spirit who is now at work in the disobedient.” We often think about Heaven being in the sky – but Paul's not talking about Heaven here. He's actually talking about Satan.

## **Disobedience**

The devil is the one who encourages people to be disobedient. He says things like, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1), and “You will not certainly die. For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil,” (3:4-5). See, that's what he told Eve, way back in Genesis. “You don't have to listen to God. He doesn't know what He's talking about.” Since the beginning of time, the devil's been real good at twisting God's word and trying to trick people into disobeying God. In the Gospels, he even tries to trip up Jesus by tempting Him in the desert.

Paul goes on. “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath,” (Eph. 2:3). Paul's brutally honest here. We deserve the cross. We've all sinned; we fall short of God's glory. And we know it! When we come to repentance, God notices that – Jesus rescues us from the doom we deserve. Toplady wrote in his song, “Let the water and the blood, from Thy wounded side which flowed, be of sin the double cure, save from wrath and make me pure.”<sup>1</sup>

We need – the whole world needs – salvation that comes from Christ alone. “But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved,” (verses 4-5). You know, the central theme of Ephesians 2 is the grace of God. It's a free gift. And it's not cheap.

## **Amazing Grace**

There are a lot of people running around, even this morning, saying, “I'm a Christian, I'm a Christian,” but they'll walk out of their churches – if they're actually in them – and go back to living the same old way they did before they ever even knew Jesus. I've told you before about working with the devout Catholic lady years ago at Kroger. She faithfully attended parish picnic every year. In her mind, that made everything a-okay. Friends, I've got bad news for people who think this way – that's not how God's grace works.

It cheapens God's grace. It's a cheap interpretation of God's grace – that perpetuates disobedience. And we talked about disobedience earlier – who's in charge of that? The devil. There's a whole lot of people who think they can pay lip service to

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<sup>1</sup> “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing, 1989), page 361.

Jesus Christ and it'll all be alright – but it won't. If they're living the same old way they've always lived, do they really know the Jesus Christ of the Bible?

Speaking of people who are disobedient, John Newton, the writer of *Amazing Grace* comes to mind. Newton was born in 1725. Just before his 7<sup>th</sup> birthday his mother died, and he was left virtually an orphan. Raised by distant relatives who made fun of him for his faith, John ran off at age 11, to live the life of a sailor. For years the man sailed the Mediterranean enjoying all the experiences and immoralities offered in every port. After a short stint in the British Navy, Newton ran away to Africa and made a fortune in the slave trade.

One night in 1779, the slave ship he was on was caught off the coast of Scotland in a violent storm, and nearly sank. Facing death caused Newton to have a conversion experience in the ship, and later he wrote his most famous hymn based on it. He says, "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."<sup>2</sup> Newton went from being a slave trader, to being a pastor, and wrote over 280 hymns. Friends, that's repentance – turning things around. "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus," (verses 6-7), Paul says next.

## Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus

In some mysterious way, one which we as humans cannot fully understand, God has already placed us with Jesus in the heavenly realms. It's a hard thing for us to grasp. Especially because we get so fixated on the things we see physically with our eyes. Helen Lemmel certainly understood that. Her dad was a Methodist pastor, who moved the family from England to Wisconsin when she was only 12 years old. Helen became part of a women's quartet that traveled what was known as the "Chautauqua Circuit" Lakeside, Ohio, is one – and they brought concerts to small towns and villages that would otherwise have had no opportunities to hear quality performers. She became a faculty member of the Moody Bible Institute, and taught vocal music at their Chicago and Los Angeles campuses.

In 1918, Helen was visiting a missionary friend who shared a gospel tract with her, and after reading it she wrote, "Suddenly, as if commanded to stop and listen, I stood still, and singing in my soul and spirit was the chorus, with not one conscious moment of putting word to word to make rhyme, or note to note to make melody. The verses were written the same week, dictated by the Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup> Helen Lemmel's song was published in a British hymn book in 1922. The hymn encourages us to look away from our sins, our struggles, and our temporary issues, and instead focus on Jesus, who is the source of our salvation. As we turn our eyes upon Him, "the things of earth grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Amazing Grace," *The UM Hymnal*, page 378.

<sup>3</sup> "Focused on Faith – Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," *Hymns of Faith and Inspiration*, (Carmel: Guideposts, 1990), page 44.

<sup>4</sup> "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus," *The UM Hymnal*, page 349.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast,” (verses 8-9). We are saved through our faith in God’s grace. We believe that Jesus Christ, the perfect Son of God, died a horrifying death on the cross and that His blood washes away our sin. We believe that He conquered death, when He rose from the dead, and left the tomb empty three days later.

### **Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)**

Our faith in God’s grace comes from God. It’s a gift. Salvation is God’s gift to us. There’s nothing we can do to earn it – He gives it freely. And by showing us the depths of His love for us, He tells us what He wants us to do. Jesus tells us in the Gospels. “Love God, and love others.”

Jesus Christ breaks the chains of sin and death. In a minute, we’re going to sing Chris Tomlin’s version of *Amazing Grace*. Of his version of the song, Tomlin says: “I never set out to take the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ and add something to it – anybody would be crazy to do that! It’s only the greatest song ever written.”<sup>5</sup> Tomlin was asked to do something with the famous hymn, as a musical feature for a movie about William Wilberforce, in 2007.

William Wilberforce was a British politician who pushed for the abolition of the slave trade in Europe in the early 1800’s. As it turns out, Wilberforce was inspired to push for abolition after hearing about the conversion experience of John Newton, who wrote the original hymn, *Amazing Grace*. Tomlin read up about Newton, and started reflecting on the lyrics of the hymn in the context of slavery. Tomlin says, “So these words just started flowing one night – my chains are gone, I’ve been set free, my God, my Savior, has ransomed me – I was thinking about how you pay a ransom for a slave – and like a flood, His mercy reigns. Unending love, Amazing Grace.”<sup>6</sup>

God pours out His amazing grace all the time on us! “For we are God’s handiwork,” the Apostle Paul writes, “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do,” (verse 10). As people of God, redeemed by our Risen Savior, we must live into that grace of God which Paul speaks of. The stories behind these hymns – and the others that we’ve looked at during this series – serve as reminders that our salvation is a gift of grace. Our response then, should be to live lives which reflect that grace to others.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, Thank You for the gift of Your amazing grace that brings us from death to life in Christ. Help us to live each day in the light of this grace, doing the good works You have prepared for us. May our lives reflect Your love and bring glory to Your name. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> “Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone),” From Discipleship Ministries, last accessed 8/21/2024, at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-amazing-grace-my-chains-are-gone>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.