

Reformation 31 October 2021  
Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36  
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth  
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

St Paul says, 'they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,' (Romans 3:24) and Jesus says, "'if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed'" (John 8:36). Let's pray:

In 1779, John Newton wrote the hymn, *Amazing Grace*.

"Amazing grace! How sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me!"

"A *wretch* like me!" sounds a bit dramatic, doesn't it? The dictionary defines the word "wretch" as a person "in a very unhappy or unfortunate state." More colourfully: "despicable, contemptible, scoundrel, villain, rogue, swine, criminal, good-for-nothing, ..." "But pastor" you protest, "we're nice Christians, not wretches, surely!"

For Newton, "wretch" wasn't strong enough. He was the only child of a sea captain father and a Christian mother who taught him the Bible at an early age. Sadly, she died when Newton was seven, and at the ripe old age of 11, he went to sea with his father, making six voyages with him before his father retired. The young Newton then signed on with a merchant ship. At the age of 19, he was kidnapped and press-ganged into service on a Royal Navy ship. Discipline wasn't his cup of tea and he tried to desert, but was captured and publicly flogged.

Newton became suicidal over this event and considered throwing himself overboard. Eventually he convinced his superiors to swap him into service on a slave ship. Again, his rebelliousness made him unpopular and the crew left

him in West Africa with a slave trader who brutally abused him. Finally, Newton was rescued by a sea captain who knew his father. On his return trip to England, Newton experienced a spiritual conversion that he referred to as his “great deliverance.”

One night, a violent storm tossed the ship around. The ship began to break apart and was sinking. John remembered the words of [Proverbs 1:26], “I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you.” He cried out, “Lord, have mercy on us”, and at that moment, the cargo shifted, plugging up the hole, and the ship drifted to safety.

Before this event, Newton had lived with complete moral abandon. He later wrote, “I sinned with a high hand and made it my study to tempt and seduce others to do the same.”

After leaving the sea and settling into an office job at the age of 30, Newton began to hold Bible studies in his home. As he grew in faith, Newton became increasingly disgusted with the slave trade and the part he’d played in it. Eventually he was ordained and spent the rest of his life serving as pastor of a London church. It was there that he met William Wilberforce, who would go on to champion the abolition of slavery [see also the film, *Amazing Grace* 2006].

Newton continued to preach until the last year of his life, despite the fact that he was blind by that time. He never forgot how God had transformed his life, and not long before his death at the age of 82, Newton preached, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Saviour!”

Until his conversion, John Newton was nothing but trouble. Nobody liked him or wanted to be around him. Every ship he signed on to was happy to get rid of him. But on the night of his conversion, he changed from sinful rebel to child of God: ‘For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light’ (Ephesians 5:8).

Imagine the trouble Newton must have had convincing people he'd changed. I wonder how long it took before those who knew his former ways stopped thinking he was only doing what he did because of what he hoped to gain? [Think of St Paul, 2 Corinthians 11; Galatians 2].

After that night on a sinking ship, John Newton knew that he was a wretch in need of a Saviour and he knew that he'd been saved only by the amazing grace of God [Romans 3:24].

Jesus saves us from the forces of rebellion against God that lie behind every form of evil. He doesn't offer just a momentary rescue from darkness with a brief glimpse of the light. He calls us to live apart from darkness by following him, the light of life.

Jesus is the divine presence, the light, come into the world to save all people from the bondage of sin. He promises salvation to wretches like you and me: "**Whoever** follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12) and be free [John 8:36].

Darkness and death press in on the world because of its rebellion against God. But Jesus offers light and life to all who will believe in him and follow him. He offers freedom from bondage to sin, yet, many don't want to listen to him. They won't admit that they're wretches in need of salvation. In fact, many believe that Jesus is the wretch. In [John 1:45-46] Philip tells Nathanael that he's found "him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, ... Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'"

The Jews clearly know that Jesus is from Nazareth, a town that has a very bad reputation. They say, "We are not illegitimate children" (John 8:41). Everyone knew that Mary was pregnant before the wedding, and many thought Jesus was the wretch who needed help. They were so convinced of their own lack of wretchedness, that they thought they didn't need a Saviour. They were wretches in need of a Saviour just as much as John Newton, just as much as you and me, but to acknowledge this would require them to change their identity.

How about you? Do you acknowledge that you're a wretch in need of a Saviour? A wretch in need of the amazing grace that comes only through Christ?

The Pharisees were certain that Jesus couldn't be from God because he didn't follow their understanding of Moses. These were men who revered the scriptures and were zealots for prayer, fasting, regular worship, and who gave generously and sacrificially to God's work. Yet, they were instrumental in Jesus being crucified. And they're not extinct.

Whenever we think things don't look the way they should; whenever we've lost our sense of joy in the grace of God, we need to be on guard. The only security against Pharisaism, is grace. Grace drove the Reformation, and as such, reformation is just as ongoing as the living presence of Christ. Daily we die to sin; daily we rise with him.

Like Newton, Luther knew that all people are sinners; wretches in need of salvation. He also understood that we have a tendency to think that we're better than others. Surely, people who have good health and good jobs and a nice home and food to eat and children who are doing the right things are being blessed by God!?!

And just as surely, people who don't have their act together - maybe their kids are in trouble all the time, maybe their house is in need of repair or their yard is a mess, maybe they don't seem to have any regular employment—surely, they're just reaping the results of their own bad choices and behaviour!?!

Surely, if they're kicked off the ship because nobody likes them, surely if they're born out of wedlock, surely if they muck up and can't seem to get it together, that means that God doesn't like them and they deserve everything that's happening to them!?!

Emphatically, "No, no, and no!"

God allowed John Newton to come close to death in order to make him realise that he was a wretch in need of grace. Jesus came into the world to show us that every single one of us is a wretch in need of his amazing grace. And he came into the world to make that grace freely available to any of us who would recognise our own wretchedness, repent, and follow him.

Although John Newton was physically blind and unable to see at the end of his life, spiritually, his eyes had been opened years earlier. "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." "Amen."

And the grace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.