

Lessons from the Great Hymns

“Amazing Grace”

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Amazing Grace was written by John Newton (1725-1800) an Evangelical-Anglican clergyman who was converted from an extremely profane life as a sailor and former slave-ship captain. He was the mentor and friend of William Cowper who wrote *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood*. Together, they had an impact on the Evangelical leader William Wilberforce, the British advocate of the anti-slavery movement in Parliament.

The hymn itself did not initially have a big impact in England. However, when it reached the United States it became a huge part of the Second Great Awakening—the national revivalist movement that transformed the religious, social, and political landscape of America. Consequently, what most people today do not realize is that *Amazing Grace* has had a two-fold impact: one personal and the second being an historical impact. The 2006 movie, *Amazing Grace*, has helped to educate people about this.

THE PERSONAL IMPACT

The hymn can be understood as a three-part narrative of the Christian life.

My past—what God has done for me.

*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!*

My present—how God is helping me.

*Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me,
His Word my hope secures;
He will my Shield and Portion be,
As long as life endures.*

My future—what it will be like for me with God.

*Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, Who called me here below,
Will be forever mine.*

*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 HISTORICAL IMPACT

Will Rogers once said that the problem in America isn't so much what people don't know; the problem is what people think they know that just ain't so. Unfortunately, Americans are too often woefully ignorant of the incredibly pivotal role Christianity (specifically Protestantism) has played in our history. The *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* makes this bold claim: "It is virtually impossible to understand the history of the American experience without Protestantism."

Using new revivalist "methods" (e.g. the prolonged revival [camp] meeting) the Second Great Awakening spread from Kentucky, Tennessee and southern Ohio across the United States to impact millions of Americans. It was characterized by enthusiasm, emotion, and an appeal to the super-natural. However, it was not just a "spiritual" renewal. It spawned many reform movements to cure the evils of society including the Abolition Movement. The Second Awakening led almost directly to the Civil War and the end of slavery in the States.

Amazing Grace was wildly popular in the United States during this era. It served as a great description of a person's awakening from a life of sin to being a grateful recipient of the transformative grace of God. The Awakening's expectation was that the transformed individual would help to transform BOTH the cultural and political aspects of society.

Revivalism focused on the Second Coming as understood from a Post-Millennial perspective. Therefore, there was no notion that Christianity was merely a "private" experience where we get "saved" and let society go to "hell in a hand-basket" as we escape to heaven.

IMPLICATIONS

Modern secularism in the United States can be seen as an attempt to limit Christianity to one's private life.

Evangelicals in England and the United States should take godly pride in how the Lord has used them to improve the human condition.

Grace needs to be more than God's forgiveness of our sins; rather, by grace He saves, sanctifies, and empowers.

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. *12* It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, *13* while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,