

YOU VERSION

AMAZING GRACE

Day One

Amazing Grace

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked (Ephesians 2:1, ESV).

In 1772, John Newton, a former slave owner, wrote the song 'Amazing Grace'. Today, nearly 250 years later, it is one of the most popular hymns ever written.

It is performed an estimated 10 million times annually and has appeared on over 11,000 albums. It was quoted in Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It has been recorded by many artists including Judy Collins, Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson and Elvis Presley. In 2015, President Obama spontaneously sang it at the memorial service for a victim of a heinous church shooting in Charleston, South Carolina. It encapsulates the meaning of God's grace.

Why is God's grace so amazing? What is it that gives us cause for wonder? Why do we love to sing about it? I fear that many people who croon Newton's song may have no idea. It arouses nice sentiments and warms our hearts, no doubt. But why? What is it really telling us? What *is* grace?

In Ephesians chapter two, Paul the apostle explains it clearly. His approach is fascinating. He begins by taking us to dark depths. Then he raises us to heavenly heights. Finally, he brings us back to everyday life on earth.

The first three verses are not comfortable. I struggle to recall a single sermon that has dealt with them in detail (including my own!). We tend to skip over them and jump right on to the more encouraging parts. But the point is that we cannot understand why grace is so amazing until we realise how desperate would be our condition without it. And that means facing honestly why we are so much in need of it and how bleak our lives would be otherwise.

The apostle begins with a bold, confronting statement: *You were dead in trespasses and sins*. The word 'trespasses' has to do with slipping off the path and going astray. We might say it refers to accidental sin. The problem is that even accidental sin is toxic. Poison taken unintentionally can still kill.

The word 'sins' is more general and includes deliberate or intentional sins. Such actions also condemn us and infect us like a deadly disease.

The good news is that either way, grace is the answer. Both *falling* and *failing* are covered. There is mercy aplenty for both!

What next?

1. How does understanding the deadly nature of sin help us to understand the value of grace?
2. Different people are tempted by different sins. Can you identify three areas where you are most prone to sin?
3. Ephesians 2:1 is not a favourite memory verse but it's easy to learn and it is important. Why not memorise it now?

Day Two

The Prince of the Power of the Air

You once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience (Ephesians 2:2, ESV).

God's Word is very plain. Sin is a terrible thing. It is easy to minimise it, but even small sins are serious. The language used here may seem extreme. But this is because we tend to downplay the sinfulness of sin. We may think that plain everyday sins like envy, pride, bitterness, greed and hatred are not so bad. But it was these very offences that put Christ on the cross (Mark 7:20-23; 15:10).

The apostle piles seven powerful images on top of one another in his attempt to detail the horrendous condition in which, without God's grace, we live. Here are the first three:

The course of this world. The world runs its course—but the race must come to an end. No matter how permanent things seem to be, they will pass away. Jesus taught how foolish it is to lay up earthly treasure (Luke 12:13-21). Nothing is more certain than that we can take nothing with us when we die.

The prince of the power of the air. Doubtless, this means Satan. Of course, popular thinking has no place for such a prince. He is the ruler of this age (John 12:31). He has a measure of power (literally authority) but only over 'the air', which is his domain. A better word might be 'atmosphere'. The devil's power was neutralised through the saving work of Christ (Rev 12:9-11), so he works through creating an environment of negativity and unbelief. Thankfully, his spirit is as vaporous as the wind and like the wind, it will vanish. This suggests how insubstantial is his kingdom.

The sons of disobedience. Disobedience is satanic and it works out in disbelief and defiance, which go together. And such are the sons of humankind. So here we are in the 21st century with wars and uprisings and rebellions and street violence far too common. Disobedience still infects too much of society.

Of course, there are many who do live upright lives. This world is a wonderful place and there are blessings all around us. But by and large, whenever sin is put down in one place it emerges in another. Satan constantly changes his appearance so that people are deceived into thinking they are doing good when they continue to sin. He too easily bewitches us. As we shall see, amazing grace is the answer.

What next?

1. What do you think are three of the most dangerous Satanic deceptions in today's world?
2. What do you think about the statement above that disbelief and defiance go together?
3. Read Eph 1:15-23. Choose one phrase of up to six words and claim it today for your life.

Day Three

A Sad Litany

We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Ephesians 2:3, ESV).

It is never comfortable talking about sin. But it must be faced. Unless we are aware of the seriousness of our sin, we cannot comprehend the greatness of God's grace.

The past tense is used here: 'We once lived...'. Thank God that Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil and to deliver us from sin (1 John 3:8) and we no longer live in it. If we do, something is seriously wrong and we need to repent. While we may still accidentally sin, we are no longer slaves to sin (Rom 6:17-18) and it is a betrayal of our faith if we are.

Passions of the flesh. The same phrase is used in 1 John 2:16 to describe a major form of worldliness. In both cases, the word 'flesh' means not just the body, but human nature generally, body, mind and spirit. It is as if everything we do is grounded in sin. The flesh strives against the Spirit (Gal 2:17). It always will.

Body (literally flesh) and mind. This means both physical life and cognitive life; both actions and thoughts. In fact, our thoughts are more pernicious. So Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that hatred is as sinister as murder, lust as adultery (Matt 5:21-28).

By nature. Here is the real problem. This is how we are. We have an inbuilt propensity to satisfy ungodly and unholy desires. We are prone to sin.

Children of wrath. The terrifying outcome is the wrath of God. This is scary. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:31).

What a sad litany of the human condition and what a tragic end. This is the depiction of a world without the grace of God. Thank God it is not the end of the story.

What next?

1. People tend to brush aside such language nowadays and to dismiss the concept of sin as simplistic or fanciful. Which ones of the following teach us otherwise? Life experience, human behaviour, the Scriptures, the entertainment industry, creation, history, infant behaviour, nature, music. If you can, give examples.
2. What did Jesus say about God's wrath? See Matt 8:12; 10:15; 11:22, 24; 13:42, 50; Luke 13:28; 21:23; John 3:16, 36.

Day Four

Rich in Mercy

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us... (Ephesians 2:4, ESV).

There are three key words in today's text.

- *Rich* = More than enough; plenty.
- *Mercy* = Kindness motivated by another's need.
- *Love* = Unconditional; totally for the benefit of others.

These all illustrate God's attitude towards us. They are already ours in Christ. We don't have to plead for them. Rather we thank God for them. He has already bestowed them on us through Christ.

Here is a hymn about mercy that I wrote not long ago. A suggestion: Why not read it aloud? (Perhaps more than once.) It'll mean a lot more. (You can access the score at www.barrychant.com)

I lift my eyes to heaven above,
enraptured by the Saviour's love;
I see the nail scars in his hands
and so I know he understands;
I give him thanks and grateful praise
and yearn to serve him all my days.

No other god would stoop so low
for sinners steeped in guilt and woe;
his blood ran down on Calvary's cross—
our glorious gain; his gracious loss.
He took the law's unbending curse
to save a fallen universe.

His love has banished all my fears;
my heart responds with joyful tears.
I worship him with bended knee
in unabashed humility
and I am found in heavenly realms
by loving-kindness overwhelmed.

What kind of mercy could this be
That Christ should give his life for me?
What kind of mercy could this be?
For time and all eternity!

What next?

1. Which phrase or word(s) in the verses above best reflect the nature of God's mercy to you personally? Why?
2. What do you think is the meaning of the phrase 'law's unbending curse'? Gal 3:10-14 may help here.

3. Why does Paul say that God is 'rich' in mercy? (See Titus 3:4-6).

New Life!

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-6, ESV).

Today we are faced with a wonderful change of scenery. Previously, we saw how desperate and hopeless was our situation. But now everything is different. Instead of being locked into the bleak and empty darkness of the prince of the power of the air where we were dead in our trespasses and sins, we are made alive in Christ.

Death is usually permanent. But not so here. Even when we are dead, there is still hope. We can be brought back to life.

From verses four to ten we find the phrase 'with Christ' or similar used five times. While we live in sin on our own, it is through Christ that we experience new life.

Paul uses three powerful expressions to illustrate our union with Christ. In the original language, each of them includes the prefix 'together'. We are made alive together with Christ; we are raised together with him; we are seated in the heavenlies together with him. We share in his triumph!

Made alive. To receive new life. Like a sick person who has been saved from dying but is still bedfast.

Raised. Not only to be alive but to be up and about. To use a biblical analogy, there is a difference between breathing while still lying in the cold, gloomy darkness of a tomb and stepping out of the grave into the shining brightness of a new day.

Jesus did not give his life just so that we could keep breathing; he gave it to raise us out of gloomy morbidity into glorious freedom and light. Not just new life, but resurrection life.

Seated. To be seated in heavenly realms together with Christ. But more of that tomorrow.

What next?

1. In your own walk with the Lord, what would correspond to new life and resurrection life? For example, new life might mean knowing you are free from sin while resurrection life might mean actually overcoming sin.
2. What do you think it means in practical terms to be in union with Christ?

Day Six

Seated in Heavenly Places

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-6, ESV).

What a contrast! Having been dead in transgressions and being the children of wrath, we now find ourselves in heavenly places with Christ! (Eph 2:6). Because of God's mercy and love, we have been given new life and new hope. We are delivered from both the *penalty* and the *power* of sin. Neither *failing* nor *falling* can destroy us.

A spiritual resurrection has taken place. Whatever we feel, this is how God sees us. Sometimes, like Lazarus, we acknowledge that we have been regenerated. But unlike Lazarus, we keep hobbling around in our grave clothes!

Being raised means the grave clothes are removed and we are free (John 11:44). A new liberation is ours. Darkness and death no longer have any hold on us. We are free from sin and transgression. We are free from depression and fear. We are free to do good works and positive deeds. We can move, we can celebrate, we can rejoice in the Lord!

But that is not all. We have also been made to sit in the heavenlies. This is not intended geographically. Heavenly places are where God dwells. And we are seated there. In other words, we have entered the realm of faith where we rest in the finished work of Christ. There is nothing we have to do to earn a place with God. Everything is free. We can now enjoy celestial blessings without pressure or strain.

Because Christ has been raised, so too have we. All things are under his feet and we have been raised together with him. We do not yet see the final benefit. The ultimate reality of our celestial home has yet to come. But meanwhile, we taste the heavenly powers through the presence of the Holy Spirit (Heb 6:4-5) and we rejoice in our great hope.

And it is all by God's amazing grace.

What next?

1. What difference does it make to know that we are seated together with Christ in heavenly places? Give examples. (See Rom 5:2-11 for some clues.)
2. On a scale of one (minimum) to 5 (maximum) how would you rate your daily experience of being raised and seated in heavenly places with Christ? Is it actually possible to answer with a five? Why? Or why not? (See Col 3:1-3)
3. Memorise Eph 2:6-7

Day Seven

The Riches of His Grace.

God raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6-7, ESV).

Recently, I watched a well-known Christian preacher on television. The message was practical, helpful and wise, but it could have been given by a member of any of the great monotheistic religions. Jesus was not mentioned even once. And without the amazing grace of Jesus, all the good advice in the world is ultimately ineffective.

First, his grace is *immeasurable*. The Greek word means abundant, abounding, going beyond the norm. It is like a huge vessel overflowing with sweet nectar where the overflow is constant. It never runs out.

Second, it is like a *treasure trove* where we can help ourselves to jewels of every possible kind, all just for the taking. In this case, the riches are spiritual—forgiveness, freedom from sin, joy, peace, contentment, power for living. And they are all ours!

Third, grace is so vast it will take eternity to gauge, for like eternity, it is immeasurable. God's grace is not for this life alone but for eternal life (John 3:16).

The phrase 'coming ages' represents another way of describing eternity. It is age after age after age, with no ending in sight. And during all those endless ages, God will continue to express his kindness in Christ Jesus. In Greek the word 'kind' is *Chrestos*, almost identical to *Christos* ('anointed') from which we derive the name 'Christ'. Jesus is both the Anointed One and the Kind One. And his kindness will never end.

The tense of the original verb 'show' is not future: it indicates ongoing present experience. The joy and intense reality of the present will banish the idea of future altogether. Now we live in hope because we are still trapped in imperfect human frames. But when that Day arrives when imperfection vanishes and everything is perfect (1 Cor 13:10) what reason will there be to continue to hope? How can the perfect be any better? How can it improve? We will live in an eternal 'now' in the glory of the presence of God! The joy of the moment will be everlasting.

What next?

1. Think of a time when your heart was filled with pure joy and love. Now pause a while and try to imagine that feeling never ending.
2. What do you think is meant by the word 'kindness'? Try to define it.

Day Eight

Saved by Grace

By grace you have been saved... by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not derived from yourself; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:5, 8, 9, ESV modified)

The problem with a passage like this one is that it is almost too well known. The result is that we stop thinking it through. So today, let's look at it again. It is certainly important, given that the first part occurs twice.

Imagine you have never seen it before. Which words jump out at you? My selection would be grace, saved, faith, gift, works and boast. Do you agree?

Let's take the last one first. Whatever else we may think, one thing is clear. There's nothing to boast about. We can claim no credit for our salvation. Pride is completely neutralised.

Now back to the first word. *Grace* means undeserved favour. If something stems from grace, it has nothing to do with merit or achievement. In fact, the very opposite may be true. Nor does it have anything to do with *lack* of merit. Nothing good we do can add to it; nothing bad we do can take away from it. It stems entirely from the giver, in this case, God.

Is there nothing we can do to win God's favour? Don't our good deeds count for something? No, all we can do is receive God's grace by faith. In fact, some expositors think that the phrase 'the gift of God' in our text actually refers to faith and that even our faith is a gift. It was while we were utterly weak and helpless that Christ died for us (Rom 5:6). Either way, salvation comes to us as a free gift. Faith is simply a tool, like a hammer or a smartphone. It earns no merit in itself.

Grace saves us. 'Save' means to rescue or deliver. It includes the idea of wholeness or health. But it is meaningless if we are not in trouble. Someone standing on a riverbank does not need to be rescued from drowning. This is why at the beginning of this chapter, Paul goes to some length to stress how desperately needy we are if left to ourselves. We are drowning in sin. We are living in darkness. We are children of wrath. Without God's saving grace, we are forever doomed. But through it all, God's grace reaches out to us. This is amazing grace!

What next?

1. Search out the story of John Newton and the hymn 'Amazing Grace'.
2. Read the lyrics of the hymn carefully and note how they reflect the nature of grace.

Day Nine

God's Masterpiece

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10, ESV).

Many years ago, I preached in the congregation where renowned Australian artist Pro Hart was a member. After church, he said, 'Come around home and I'll give you a painting.'

Pro had been dramatically converted a few years previously and was now a vibrant Christian. He had an extensive art Gallery at his house with many valuable paintings on display, including his own; but he led my wife and me to a shed in his backyard where he rummaged around and pulled out two sheets of chipboard, worth a few dollars at the most.

When he turned them around, however, there were beautiful paintings on the other side. He finished up giving us both of them.

I thought immediately of our text today. 'We are God's workmanship...' The word is *poiema* from which we derive the word 'poem'. In ourselves, we are nothing more valuable than old pieces of wood but when God takes hold of us, he transforms us into works of art! To be God's workmanship means that something wonderful has happened to us.

After being in the shed, both paintings were dusty and scratched. But they were still 'Pro Harts' and later we had the damage repaired and the paintings beautifully framed. Similarly, in this life, there are still imperfections. The final work in us has yet to be perfected. We are not yet in heaven.

The quality of any piece of art depends on the skill of the artist. The fact that a painting is signed 'Pro Hart' is enough for most people. When God makes something, his skill is more than enough. Who dares to question the quality of what God does!

Imagine if you were to look in the mirror one morning, and the person you saw there was recognisably you, but completely without blemish. No scratches, no dry skin, no wrinkles or blotches, shiny eyes, tidy hair, perfect shape. Spiritually, this is how things are with us. When we look into God's mirror, we see ourselves as he sees us, complete in Christ (James 1:23-25). So we need such a faith-image of ourselves. To see by faith what God sees.

Through Jesus we are God's workmanship. This is amazing grace.

What next?

1. If you are God's *poiema*, what would you like him to be saying through you to people who 'read' you? Name three things.
2. Which imperfections would you like God to remove in the artwork of your life?
3. In what ways might your faith-image differ from the real you?

Day Ten

Plod with God

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10, ESV).

In verse two, the apostle refers to us walking in trespasses and sins. Here he sees us walking in good works.

In verse nine, he points out that salvation is not of works but here he tells us that we are to do good works.

'Good works' is a common phrase. Perhaps 'good deeds' might be preferred. Or even better, 'benevolent actions'. However we put it, the meaning is not hard to grasp. Benevolence is never for ourselves; it is necessarily for others. We are God's workmanship, not so that we can preen ourselves with borrowed beauty, but so that we can serve God well.

Good works are never enough to counteract sin or earn merit with God. That is not their purpose. There are two better reasons. First, to reflect the image of God so that people see what we do and glorify God. In Christ, we are like lights in a dark world (Matt 5:15-16) or perfume in a garbage dump (2 Cor 2:15-16).

Second, they are for the benefit of others. We act in such a way that other people's needs are met, whoever they are, whether believers or unbelievers, male or female, managers or labourers, regardless of language, colour, sexual practices or political views (Luke 10:25-37; Gal 6:9-10; 2 Thess 3:13). Like Jesus at the Samaritan well, we are not stopped by social barriers.

And we are to walk in good works. To walk means to make progress, to get somewhere. So walking in good works means advancing and improving our way of life. It is not dramatic, just consistent. I used to tell my students to 'plod with God'.

It is too easy for us to become so focused on our own issues that we ignore those of others. To go to church for personal blessings; to hear sermons that tell us how to be happier and healthier; to become more cheerful, or more popular; to ignore or avoid people in need.

God even prepares benevolent works for us to do, just as a mother arranges tasks suitable for her children. She doesn't begin by asking toddlers to fix her computer. At first, it's just to pick up the toys and tidy the room. Later, they will wash the dishes or use sharp knives or repair things. So God prepares the right tasks in advance for us to do. If he prepares them, we can do them!

For *in Christ* we can do anything and everything God calls us to do. Not to earn grace but to express it. Amazing.

What next?

1. Try memorising Ephesians 2:10 and making it a life-formula.
2. What are three ways today in which you could implement Galatians 6:10?

Day Eleven

I Am Becoming Who I Am

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10, ESV).

It may seem strange to say, 'I am becoming who I am.'. How can we become what we already are?

Think of it like this. Imagine you are holding a newborn baby in your arms. There she is, cute, cuddly, beautiful, adorable. Is she also human? Of course. But what can she do? Well, not much really. There are only about three things babies can do. So is she fully human? Yes. Absolutely. Can any actions she takes make her more human? No. Not at all. Being human doesn't depend on what we do; it is who we are.

As a baby girl grows, she will discover new things, develop new skills and accomplish new tasks. She will become beautiful in a different way. She is a person and now she is acting like a person. She is a human being human. She is becoming who she really is.

Exactly the same principle applies in the kingdom of God. We are born into God's family and we are his children. At first we may not be particularly effective. Even worse, we may be dismally ineffective. But that does not mean we are not children of God. Just that we have some growing to do. To become in practice what we are potentially. And this will almost certainly be different from God's purpose for everyone else. I am becoming who I am, not who my neighbour is.

Understanding what God has done for us in Christ is vital to following Christ. It means we are well able to do anything he prepares for us to do because he has prepared it in such a way that we can.

So we go back to the previous two verses (8 and 9). *Grace* is God's part; *faith* is ours. We are saved by grace. We lay hold of it by faith. Not by what we have done, which always fails, but by what Christ has done, which never fails. At the end of the day, it is all the free and gracious blessing of God.

For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for the good works which he prepared in advance for us to walk in.

What Next?

1. How does understanding verse 10 help when other people's endeavours seem to be (a) more effective or (b) less effective than yours?
2. If God called you to be a missionary, how would verse 10 help you to respond to that call?
3. Memorise Ephesians 2:10.