

How Sweet the Sound

Do you have a favorite song? Why do you love it? Does the rhythm or melody put a spring in your step? Is it nostalgic? Does it bring back wonderful memories? Do the lyrics carry special significance and meaning to you?

Without a doubt, one of the great hymns of the Christian faith is “Amazing Grace”. It is beloved in both Christian and secular circles. It expresses, with raw honesty, every person’s greatest need and God’s initiative to meet that need at His expense. The hymn begins with these powerful exclamations:

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.

We all need reminders of the barrenness caused by our sin.

It is as true today as it was for God’s people in the sixth century B.C. At the time, the Jews had been back in their homeland, laid the foundation of God’s temple, built their homes, and planted their fields. Yet they had become complacent and comfortable. So, God prompted the prophet Haggai to speak to them four times in quick succession to remind them of their purpose of being back home. First, Haggai called God’s people to resume their work of completing the temple after their disobedience had them neglect the work for almost two decades. A month later, the prophet encouraged them in their renewed efforts by addressing their circumstantial fears and reminding them of His sovereign presence. The prophet’s third message, recorded in Haggai 2:10-19, communicates God’s promised blessing in spite of His people’s repeated failures.

Haggai’s oracle details God’s response to His people’s frustration. It had been two months since God had assured them of His presence, yet their fields were just now being planted and their previous yield was sparse (vv. 15-17). Apparently, they had expected that their renewed efforts would negate the consequences of their disobedience. However, through the use of two illustrations from the Mosaic Law (vv. 11-13), the prophet showed that “unclean” people can only build an “unclean” temple (v. 14). While God reassured His people of His blessing, He wanted more than simply a return to work - He wanted a change of heart. In the end, God’s

people needed Him to extend His grace to them, since their hearts remained far from Him. Even their best efforts were “unclean.”

We need God to intervene and turn our fallen and sinful condition into a complete metamorphosis as well. We need His grace to save us and transform us as we turn from our disobedience and place our faith in Christ. There is no other way for this to be accomplished but by grace. The rottenness of sin has polluted every part of us and cannot be improved by simply adding a few “good seasonings” (Is 64:6; see also Romans 3:9-18). The radical heart transplant - from sinfulness to righteousness - is a gift that only God can supply.

This reality is what captured the heart of John Newton and compelled him to pen his musical testimony - a testimony of a life transformed by God’s amazing grace. A faithless seaman and slave trader, born-again into an abolitionist and man of deep faith, who could claim the following with great certainty:

“I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.”

May we never grow tired of singing and speaking of His amazing grace. As J.C. Ryle said, “Tell them all about Jesus... tell them what He has done for the chief of sinners; tell them what He is willing to do until the last day of time; tell it to them over and over again. Never be tired of speaking of Christ.”

Romans 5:15, 17 (ESV) - *“But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many... For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ..”*