

"Amazing Grace" was not recorded until 1922, reflecting the penchant of record companies to record marches, standard popular tunes, classical music, and comedic songs and sketches in the years before World War I. By the 1920s, however, many in the recording industry became convinced that traditional music could be profitably marketed to immigrant groups, African-American communities, and white rural southerners. The commercially recorded versions of "Amazing Grace" fit neatly into what the companies at the time termed either their "race" catalogs, or their "hillbilly" and "old-time" catalogs.

Several early recordings of "Amazing Grace" feature African-American "singing preachers," the most popular of whom was Reverend J. M. Gates. Gates viewed the song as "one of the good old familiar hymns" that would help his listeners return to the traditional religious values of the past. Gates' first recording for Columbia proved quite popular--dealers ordered 3,400 advanced copies and requested more than ten times that number for his second release.

Owing largely to the popularity of Gates' recordings, dozens of other black preachers made recordings of religious songs and sermons. Other black preachers who recorded "Amazing Grace" included J. C. Burnett (with a more fiery delivery than Gates'), Reverend M. L. Thrasher, and Reverend H. R. Tomlin. These performances usually were preceded by a short statement on the religious significance of the song. As well, the performances often included the

practice of lining out the song, a traditional method of delivery in both the African- and Anglo-American religious traditions in which the preacher spoke a line of the song and the congregation sang it back.

At the same time that commercial companies were recording "Amazing Grace" with an eye toward profit, folklorists were documenting the song for scholarly purposes. From its inception in 1928 the Library of Congress' Archive of American Folk-Song sent collectors into the field first with wax cylinder recorders, then instantaneous disc recorders. Though somewhat limited in fidelity compared to the equipment used by the commercial companies, these recorders had the advantage of being portable. As such, field recordings could capture a performance in its intended physical and cultural context and often were accompanied by interviews documented on the recording or through field notes. Collectors such as the Lomax Family (John A., Alan, and Ruby T.), Herbert Halpert, Sydney Robertson, and John Henry Faulk made recordings that demonstrate the wide diffusion of "Amazing Grace" through many different communities.

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Pamphlet 329

## **John Newton and the Lyrics to Amazing Grace**



### **"Amazing Grace"**

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That sav'd 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 reliev'd;  
How precious did that grace appear,  
The hour I first believ'd!

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

The Lord has promis'd good to me,  
His word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be,  
As long as life endures.

Yes, 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 call'd me here below,  
Will be forever mine.

John Newton, *Olney Hymns*  
(London: W. Oliver, 1779).

John Newton, the author of the lyrics to *Amazing Grace*, was born in 1725 in Wapping, Britain. Despite the powerful message of "Amazing Grace," Newton's religious beliefs initially lacked conviction; his youth was marked by religious confusion and a lack of moral self-control and discipline.

After a brief time in the Royal Navy, Newton began his career in slave trading. The turning point in Newton's spiritual life was a violent storm that occurred one night while at sea. Moments after he left the deck, the crewman who had taken his place was swept overboard. Although he manned the vessel for the remainder of the tempest, he later commented that, throughout the tumult, he realized his helplessness and concluded that only the grace of God could save him. Prodded by what he had read in Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, Newton took the first step toward accepting faith.

These incidents and his 1750 marriage to Mary Catlett changed Newton significantly. On his slave voyages, he encouraged the sailors under his charge to pray. He also began to ensure that every member of his crew treated their human cargo with gentleness and concern. Nevertheless, it would be another 40 years until Newton openly challenged the trafficking of slaves.

Some three years after his marriage, Newton suffered a stroke that prevented him from returning to sea; in time, he interpreted this as another step in his spiritual voyage. He assumed a post in the Customs Office in the

port of Liverpool and began to explore Christianity more fully. As Newton attempted to experience all the various expressions of Christianity, it became clear that he was being called to the ministry. Since Newton lacked a university degree, he could not be ordained through normal channels. However, the landlord of the parish at Olney was so impressed with the letters Newton had written about his conversion that he offered the church to Newton; he was ordained in June 1764.

In Olney, the new curate met the poet William Cowper, also a newly-born Christian. Their friendship led to a spiritual collaboration that completed the inspiration for "Amazing Grace," the poem Newton most likely wrote in Kington, Warwickshire around Christmas 1772. The lyrics are based on his reflections on an Old Testament text he was preparing to preach on, adding his perspective about his own conversion while on his slave ship, the *Greyhound*, in 1748.

Newton's lyrics have become a favorite for Christians, largely because the hymn vividly and briefly sums up the doctrine of divine grace. The lyrics are based on 1 Chronicles 17:16-17, a prayer of King David in which he marvels at God's choosing him and his house. Newton apparently wrote this for use in a sermon he preached on this passage on New Year's Day 1773, and for which he left his sermon notes, which correspond to the flow of the lyrics. (He entitled the piece "Faith's review and expectation.")

The song has also become known as a favorite with supporters of freedom and human rights, both Christian and non-Christian, in part because many assume it to be Newton's testimony about his slave trading past.

The hymn was quite popular on both sides in the American Civil War.

### **Extra Verses**

In her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe quoted three stanzas as seemingly from one hymn, two of them corrupt versions of *Amazing Grace* stanzas, and one reading:

When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining like the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we first begun.

Despite its relatively poor mesh with the rest of the hymn (the change from "I" to "we," change of subject, no reference for "there"), a form of this stanza became common as part of *Amazing Grace* in hymnals in the early twentieth century, due in large part to the influential hymnodist and publisher Edwin Othello Excell. While the stanza is often credited to John P. Rees (1828-1900), it antedates his birth. It was in print by 1790, added to an old and widely-varied hymn most usually beginning "Jerusalem, my happy home", and was still appearing as part of this hymn in books published around the time of Stowe's book.