



The Story of Amazing Grace

The Testimony of God's Grace through John Newton.

Lesson Overview and Summary:

This is probably one of the more important BDG's of the year, if not the most, because it is the Gospel, and it also sets the stage for the rest of the year. The Holy Spirit works if and only if there is faith, and what is our faith but the story of God's amazing grace?

This BDG is based off of the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams' sermon at Zanzibar Cathedral in Tanzania, Africa on February 18, 2007. The part of the sermon that touched me the most were John Newton's final words: "...but I remember two things: I am a great sinner and that Jesus is a great Saviour."

The unfortunate event that unraveled God's glorious creation was the beginning of sin. We know the story of how Eve was tricked by Satan. Eve ate the fruit not because it looked good, but because eating the fruit promises infinite knowledge and power! For the first time, she put her own interests ahead of God's and thought, "Hey, sounds really good!" and ate it. Eve was NOT the only one who sinned. She passed the fruit to Adam. If he were smart, he'd say, "Why did you disobey God? Now go say sorry!" But no, he ate it like she did because he wanted that infinite knowledge and power. So God had to kick them out of Eden because in Eden there is only perfection, but Adam and Eve were no longer perfect.

Adam and Eve did not know how serious their sin was. From then on, humankind was enslaved by sin. Even God's chosen people, the Israelites, were enslaved by sin. The only thing the Israelites had were God (or His Temple) and a set of 700+ rules to make sure they don't sin! Why is sin so serious? Just as love creates, sin breaks. It breaks peoples' relationships with each other (that's why we have lies, abuses, racism, etc.); it breaks peoples' relationship with themselves (that's why we have problems about self-image, self-esteem, suicides, etc.); and it breaks peoples' relationships with God.

John Newton was a slave trader in the early 18th century, and he embodied those three parts of brokenness. He was an atheist and trades slaves! But John Newton discovered God's lovingkindness when he almost died from a storm at sea. However, he did not completely change, and continued to trade slaves until a violent illness (that maybe almost killed him) set him straight. He gave up the slave trade because he finally saw the slaves from the perspective of God's lovingkindness—these slaves are people! He later became a priest and was an important influence in other Christians (one of whom we'll study later). He is best known for writing the most famous hymn: Amazing Grace.

From Newton, we learn that while sin breaks, love not only creates, but heals. It heals brokenness! And the epitome of love is summarized in Jesus, who came to heal the sick, the poor, and above all else, the sinners. This gift of salvation is free, but is only given to those who need it. And only broken and imperfect people need salvation.

Schedule of the Evening:

1. Lesson (20-30 minutes)
2. Discussion (20-30 minutes)
3. Time of prayer and praise. (10 minutes-ish)

Outline:

1. Continuing from the Last Lesson:
 - a. God's purpose for Creation is to worship Him, but what happened?
 - b. Eve's sin: Disobeyed God *intentionally* because of personal gain
 - i. She wanted the fruit so she can be somehow "above" God!
 - c. Adam's sin: Willingly following her instead of insisting on what's right!
 - d. The Result of Sin: brokenness:
 - i. Brokenness in relationships with humanity
 1. Adam's second sin: pointing the finger at Eve and God!
 2. Eve's second sin: pointing the finger at the snake... and God!
 3. No longer do people trust each other.
 - ii. Brokenness in relationship with God.
 1. We have lost our purpose—to worship Him only!
 2. That's why God kicked both out of Eden—only perfect people can fellowship with God!

- iii. Brokenness in the self
 - 1. Because of imperfection, we age and wither away.
 - 2. Because we also lost our purpose, it's easy for humans to engage in wrong behaviors (drugs, for example) to try to "fill that void"!
- 2. John Newton: a story of a person who exemplifies those three brokennesses:
 - a. Relationship with God: staunch atheist!
 - b. Relationship with humanity: slave trader.
 - c. Relationship with self: he continued slave trading until a violent fever finally set him straight!
 - d. But what makes John Newton an important saint?
 - i. When he first knew Christ, he didn't stop trading slaves. His life was not really transformed. After conversion, he understood what Jesus' love and kindness meant—and that changed how he saw others!
 - ii. He gave up slavery and became a priest.
 - iii. By the Holy Spirit, he was able to be an important figure in the abolition movement! One of his disciples (we'll talk about him later) will be one of the most important politicians to ban slavery in England.
- 3. Lessons from John Newton's life:
 - a. God's Lovingkindness Restores Our Relationship With God!
 - i. We are no longer locked in sin, but freed from its powers so we can worship God freely!
 - 1. In other words, our original purpose is restored!
 - ii. And how did this love get epitomized? Romans 5: 6-8
 - iii. It's his blood that leads to forgiveness, his kindness that leads to repentance, his mercy that allows us to fellowship with him!
 - b. God's lovingkindness restores our relationship with ourselves!
 - i. Because our relationship with God makes us realize our brokenness—but also shows us the greatness of God's love—a love so great it repairs that brokenness!
 - ii. Because we have a purpose, we now can see ourselves not as too thin, too fat, too short, etc., but we see ourselves as His children, equally loved by God!
 - c. God's lovingkindness restores our relationships with each other!
 - i. We don't see people the wrong way anymore! We see them as broken and in need of Jesus! We see people in the lens of Jesus!
 - ii. Thus, when people in Uganda are suffering because of some crazy guy, we can't just sit back and live happy—we can't help but wish we can do something!!
- 4. What you need to think about:
 - a. So God's lovingkindness is embodied in Jesus, who gave us a gift of salvation. But this salvation is given only if you want it.
 - i. And when will you want it? Simple—if you think you need it.
 - ii. And when will you need it? If you are someone who is broken or not perfect!

5. Newton's legacy

a. Banning slavery

- i. Newton was so horrified at his involvement that he wanted to see it banned. A new Christian came to his office one time and asked him about it. We'll talk about him in a month or two. (William Wilberforce)

b. Restoring Relationships

- i. There is a town in Sierra Leone named after Newton, and there, a church exists that is STILL supported financially by the 2 churches that Newton pastored in England.
- ii. God's lovingkindness moves us to treat each other similarly—and this transcends race, class, or whatever boundaries exist!

c. Amazing Grace

- i. Newton is best known for this hymn: Amazing Grace.
- ii. His last words were: "I am a very old man and my memory has gone. But I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, but Jesus is the great Saviour."

6. DISCUSSION