CHAPTER 1

AMAZING GRACE

A savage ocean storm awoke the crew of the *Greyhound*, a cargo ship crammed with merchandise collected from the west coast of Africa. From port to port, the ship had been slowly filled with African gold, ivory, beeswax, and camwood (lumber). But now, late in the dark night of March 21, 1748, a twenty-two-year-old sailor named John was awakened by gale-force winds battering the ship. Waves slammed into her and ripped away the upper timbers on one side, sending water through a gaping hole into John’s room. Awakened by the chaos, he jumped half naked from his bed to furiously hand pump water back into the swaying ocean. With the cold saltwater pouring into the aging and broken vessel, crewmates grabbed buckets and began tossing the water back into the dark sea. Newton cranked for his life while waves broke over his head. Desperation overwhelmed the doomed crew, and John’s heart pounded furiously with adrenaline-charged fears of being dumped overboard in the middle of a dark sea, weeks away from the nearest coastline. Like many sailors of his time, he couldn’t swim.

As John Newton later reflected, he was unfit to live and unfit to die. The fear of death strained his energies at the water pump, but it was a battle he could not win. Saltwater waves continued crashing against the ship, and the endless ocean of water rushed over the deck faster than the men could spit it back out. The ship creaked and groaned under the assault as the crew frantically battled the angry forces of the sea.

Newton’s moral life had already sunk. He was a wicked and insubordinate

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1 For a detailed account, see Aitken, 69–84.
young man with a profane tongue, flesh-driven appetites, and stone-cold heart. He had gambled his way into debt and dabbled in witchcraft. And as a young man in foreign lands, he had become sexually promiscuous. Later, as a young captain of a slave-trading ship, he may have indulged his lusts further by raping captive African women in the “sexual free-for-alls on board ship that most captains in the trade regarded as theirs by right.” He didn’t particularly enjoy alcohol, but he drank to prompt drunkenness in others and to entertain himself by the follies the liquor encouraged in them. What is clear: Newton was immune from no sin. He delighted to lead others into temptation, later calling himself “a ringleader in blasphemy and wickedness.”

Not content with running the broad way myself, I was indefatigable in enticing others; and, had my influence been equal to my wishes, I would have carried all the human race with me. I had the ambition of a Caesar or an Alexander, and wanted to rank in wickedness among the foremost of the human race.

Life on the sea only amplified Newton’s wretched tendencies. He sailed for months in a bubble of unchecked sin, estranged from godly examples, cut off from the gospel, hardened by the dangers of sea life, and entrenched among a group of men who incited one another to sin. Life on an eighteenth-century merchant ship was the spiritually deadening climate his soul least needed.

The Wretch

If any man was unworthy of deliverance from the raging sea, it was the twenty-two-year-old sailor John Newton. In this moment Newton was focused on
survival and frightened by the nearness of death that knocked on the door with each crashing wave. Desperate and fully expecting to die, Newton finally blurted aloud, “If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us.” The Lord’s name from his mouth—that word he only spouted in vain—now struck his heart like an arrow, humbling and breaking him. “I was instantly struck by my own words. This was the first desire I had breathed for mercy for many years.”

As with the thief on the cross facing death, the Lord ignited a marvelous work in John Newton’s heart here in this “great day of turning.” Although the precise time of his conversion is unknown, his plea for mercy on the sea was immediately answered. And Newton’s heart, which once spewed wickedness and blasphemy, would soon become a heart gushing beloved hymns of praise to God. The same tongue that spit curses at the name of God and made sailors blush would become the tongue that steered the corporate worship of God’s people in honoring God’s holy name. This drowning wretch of a sailor would pen a hymn that endures in the minds and hearts of people to this day, a hymn so popular that its lyrics are as recognizable throughout the English-speaking world as any national anthem. On top of this, the lucrative African slave trade that he participated in would be ended, in part because of his abolitionist work. Newton would become a pastor, no longer leading sinners into sin but now enticing sinners away from it. In time, hundreds of souls would gather weekly on Sundays to listen to his sermons. Only God himself could have imagined what was in store for John Newton. Like Jonah running away from God, Newton was delivered from death at sea in order to preach the good news.

Though never formally trained, Newton would become a prominent pastor in two churches in England for forty-three years. He would befriend George Whitefield and John Wesley. As Newton frantically churned the water pump on March 21, 1748, he could not have imagined his life physically continuing; still less could he have imagined his life spiritually thriving under the incredible plans foreordained by God.

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6 Aitken, 76.
7 Newton: “I have still some faint remembrance of my pious mother, and the care she took of my education, and the impression it made upon me when I was a child, for she died when I was in my seventh year. I had even then frequent intervals of serious thoughts. But evil and folly were bound up in my heart; my repeated wanderings from the good way became wider and wider; I increased in wickedness as in years: But you have my Narrative, and I need not tell you how vile and how miserable I was, and how presumptuously I sat in the chair of the scorner, before I was twenty years old. My deliverance from Africa [1747], and afterwards from sinking in the ocean [1748], were almost miraculous; but about the year 1749 (I cannot exactly fix the date) the Lord, to whom all things are possible, began to soften my obdurate heart” (Letters [Taylor], 125).
8 The actual date of the storm as recorded by Newton was March 11 (OS), but due to an eleven-day shift in the calendar that occurred in 1752, the successive anniversary was celebrated by Newton on
Leading with a Limp

During that frantic night in 1748, one sailor was swept overboard and died, but Newton and his other crewmates miraculously survived the storm. They endured intense starvation for weeks as the ship limped to shore, staying afloat thanks to the buoyant cargo of beeswax and lumber. For the remainder of his life, Newton would celebrate March 21 as the annual reminder of God’s gracious deliverance of his fragile life. The smashed and sinking ship provided a fitting metaphor for his spiritual state; the churning abyss clawing at him was a fitting metaphor for the flames of hell. He had been to the edge of human existence. In desperation, Newton had turned to the God he despised, grasped the hope of the gospel, and never let go.

From that day until the end of his life, Newton walked with a spiritual limp. John Newton was the chief of sinners, and if he could be saved by God’s unmerited favor, no person on planet Earth was too wicked or too far beyond the reach of God’s grace to be saved. If there is one point of self-understanding Newton lived with, it is that his salvation could never have originated within himself. Grace broke his life just as powerfully as an unexpected ocean storm broke his security. Out of his humble self-awareness, Newton wrote hymns as if he were composing words for himself; he preached sermons as a hungry sheep himself telling other sheep where to find food; he wrote pastoral letters as a fellow traveler with dusty feet on his own journey to the Celestial City, and as a friend with a second crutch he was willing to lend to fellow travelers. John Newton lived with a deep and abiding awareness of God’s amazing grace that broke into his wicked life. And out of that redemption flowed decades of merciful pastoral care for fellow sinners.

How Sweet the Sound

For all the many themes Newton addresses in his ministry, his sermons, his hymns, and his letters, one word provides a summary of his life and testimony—grace. From start to finish, Newton’s life in Christ was lived in grace. Grace was not only a defibrillator jolt at the beginning of his Christian life; grace was the saving and restraining power of God at every stage. “If the Lord were to leave me one hour, I should fall into gross evil. I am like a child, who dares not go across Cheapside [a bustling downtown Lon-
Amazing Grace, unless someone holds his hand.” For Newton, the Christian life could only be explained by God’s sustaining grace. Grace saved his wretched soul. Grace sought him out. Grace removed his spiritual blindness and opened his spiritual eyes. Grace taught him to fear God. Grace relieved his fears. Grace led him to hope. The life and ministry of Newton can all fit under the banner of grace—God’s abundant, all-sufficient, infinite, sovereign, unceasing, and amazing grace.

Fittingly, we begin this study with Newton’s most famous and most often recited words, a New Year’s Day hymn inspired by 1 Chronicles 17, a chapter that speaks of King David’s past, present, and future. Newton aptly titled the hymn “Faith’s Review and Expectation,” but today it is more widely remembered by its first two words: “Amazing Grace.” The language and biblical theology of 1 Chronicles 17 drench Newton’s hymn. But it’s more than instructive. Reflecting his personal practice on New Year’s, the hymn itself provides a doxological moment in time to stop to thank God for his past mercies, his present mercies, and his future mercies.

The brief hymn summarizes grace as one of the essential themes in the Christian life, from beginning to end. It originally appeared in published form like this:

1 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.

2 '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!

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

Eclectic, 272.

Marylynn Rouse makes this perceptive connection in her resources at www.johnnewton.org. Setting the text of “Amazing Grace” alongside 1 Chronicles 17 will show just how deeply Newton’s hymn soaked up the rich biblical theology of this chapter of Scripture. Direct lines of contact are made by the terms house/home, word, and forever. Also notice the corresponding tenses of the hymn echoed in 1 Chronicles 17: past (v. 7, “I took you from the pasture”), present (v. 16, “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?”), and future (v. 26, “O Lord, you are God, and you have promised this good thing to your servant”).
4 The Lord has promised good to me,
   His word my hope secures:
He will my shield and portion be,
   As long as life endures.

5 Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
   And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the vail,
   A life of joy and peace.

6 The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
   The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who call'd me here below,
   Will be for ever mine. 11

Although this book will mostly focus on Newton’s letters, hymns like “Amazing Grace” are a fitting big-picture introduction into his understanding of the Christian life. The entire Christian life is here: from salvation (“sav’d a wretch like me”), through trials (“many dangers, toils, and snares”), struggles with doubts and need for divine promises (“his word my hope secures”), protection in spiritual battle (“he will my shield and portion be”), and aging and facing death (“when this flesh and heart shall fail”), to hopes for re-creation (“earth shall soon dissolve like snow”), anticipation for the beatific vision (“A life of joy and peace”), and on into eternity (“But God, who call’d me here below, / will be for ever mine”). From the beginning to the end of this autobiographical hymn, we are introduced to the unswerving grace of God throughout the Christian’s immortal, eternal existence. Newton communicates this vision of the Christian life in catchy language very easily read and sung. Most of the words he uses (about 85 percent of the hymn) are one syllable, and that reveals much about Newton’s commitment to clarity and simplicity, traits that spill over into all his pastoral work and explain his enduring place as a spiritual luminary so many centuries after his death.

Of course, nothing from the pen of Newton endures like this hymn. Amazon.com currently sells the song in 12,700 different versions. It has been recorded in every genre, including jazz, country, folk, classical, R&B, hip-hop—even heavy metal! The popularity of the hymn is obvious at

11 W, 3:353.
Amazing Grace

sporting events and political rallies, among other settings. It endures as one of few religious songs that can be sung impromptu in public because many people (if not most people) can recite at least the first verse by heart.

The hymn is, first, brilliant biography (of David) and, second, brilliant autobiography (of Newton). Newton is the wretch, a term he often used to allude to his own sin and to a period of captivity he endured before his conversion. But most brilliantly of all, the hymn functions as a collective autobiography for every Christian. “Amazing Grace” is perceptive biblical theology, embraced by one man deeply moved by his own redemption, articulated for corporate worship.

Amazing Theology

In a song reaching such heights of cultural popularity, it’s easy to miss the radical claims of the lyrics. “Amazing Grace” is profoundly theological, and Reformed theology gleams like a diamond in the first two verses. The hymn is rooted in the sovereign initiative of God. It is a song about spiritually dead and spiritually blind sinners finding new life, or, rather, being found by God. We were lost, and grace found us. We were blind, and grace gave us sight. We were wretched, and grace initiated its saving work on us. To find grace so amazing, human boasting must be silenced, and that is essentially what the hymn accomplishes. Human boasting is excluded (Rom. 3:27).

According to records, the hymn was unveiled and first sung by Newton’s congregation in Olney on January 1, 1773. Newton had spent weeks getting it ready to kick off the New Year. On hand that Friday morning was his friend the poet William Cowper (1731–1800). But just a few hours after singing the new hymn, Cowper, who was depression-prone, was suddenly seized with a sense of despair about his relationship with God. That afternoon Cowper penned a famous hymn of his own: “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.” And later that night, overcome by nightmares and hallucinations, and believing God was now calling him to sacrifice himself in the same way he called Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, he rose from his bed, found a knife, and slashed himself. He would be found before he bled to death, but Cowper would never again attend church, and the suicide attempt would be catalogued as one episode of many in his long bout with despair.

12Aitken, 218.
With his counsel and his hymn “Amazing Grace,” Newton “had tried hard to persuade Cowper that God's grace is universal and never withheld from a believer, but depression closed the poet’s mind to this truth.”\(^\text{13}\) Cowper was convinced God had become angry with him, and Newton would spend years—decades—serving his friend’s physical needs and laboring to convince him of God’s abundant and amazing grace. Amazing grace can be a hard sell. Even today, some professing Christians find the bold message of “Amazing Grace” tough to stomach. Yet this radical message of God's sovereign, life-transforming grace was the keynote of Newton’s ministry.

Grace is amazing, as Newton discovered firsthand on the sinking Greyhound. Grace is free, sovereign, and sufficient. And yet, convincing sinners of God's free grace, as Newton would discover, was a laborious full-time task. He became an apologist of God’s free and unmerited favor and devoted his life to confirming God’s grace and applying the promises of Scripture to the lives of his parishioners, his acquaintances, and his friends; and he did so through songs, sermons, and personal letters. From the hard lessons learned at his friend’s bedside, Newton would never make the mistake of assuming grace.

**Sovereign Grace**

One of the most beautiful paradoxes in God's wisdom is *sovereign grace*. The same grace that is *unmerited* is also *unstoppable*. Grace is a battering ram. Grace is forced entry. And Newton’s famous hymn is filled with this sovereign grace. In another hymn he opens with this verse:

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Sovereign grace has pow'r alone
To subdue a heart of stone;
And the moment grace is felt,
Then the hardest heart will melt.\(^\text{14}\)
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Grace alone is powerful enough to break the sinner’s bondage to wickedness. "His grace can overcome the most obstinate habits."\(^\text{15}\) Grace breaks in to free and unshackle souls. Grace takes away the guilt of sin, the love of sin, and the dominion of sin, even hard sins like drunkenness.\(^\text{16}\)

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\(^{13}\) Aitken, 229.
\(^{14}\) *W*, 3:428.
\(^{15}\) *W*, 4:328.
\(^{16}\) *W*, 4:189–90, 328.
Newton speaks firsthand of sin’s self-destructive power, and firsthand of the power of grace to liberate the soul. “The mercy of God is infinite, and the power of his grace is invincible” (see Rom. 11:29). And the same invincible grace that brings salvation is the same grace that is “training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:12). Only grace breaks us free from the power of self-destructive sins and empowers the true freedom of obedience (Rom. 6:14).

Understanding God’s sovereign grace at the front end of the Christian life is critical for understanding the rest of the Christian life, because we are certain to face personal sin and insufficiency all throughout the Christian journey. What hope is there for a redeemed Christian who sees indwelling sin still lurking in his heart? If justification can be explained only by the sovereign grace of God, then sanctification can be rooted only in the same cause. God’s sovereign grace stabilizes the Christian life. Newton explains, “That I am still preserved in the way, in defiance of all that has arisen from within and from without to turn me aside, must be wholly ascribed to the same sovereignty,” that is, the same sovereignty that saved him.

**Grace Builds off a Blueprint**

As we will see many times, Newton is a master craftsman of metaphor, and he employs every image at his disposal to explain the Christian life. In one place, he explains the Christian life with a building metaphor framed by Paul’s words in Philippians: “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (1:6). Paul’s “good work” was the Christian life in its complete form.

In a large building project the foundations are laid deep. Metaphorically, grace works below the soil and out of view to lay the sturdy foundations of the Christian life. Down under the soil the work seems slow, and then the walls begin to go up. But so does the scaffolding. The building progresses behind this scaffolding, and in broad daylight the mess and trash and broken stones and building materials lying around the site cloud the progress from many bystanders. The progress is obscured by the rubble. This is the perspective we often have of ourselves and other Christians. The

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17 Letters (Palmer), 129.
18 W, 2:108.
Christian life is a hard-hat area, and we struggle to see God’s “good work” coming together in the mess of our lives.

How different is the view of the architect. The architect has done this many times before, and he perceives the end of the project from the first stone to the final shrub. He can steer the progress along to the end he designed. He may need to adjust the materials or change the schedule, but even in the jobsite mess, the end product is clear in his imagination. In time, the project will be finished: the scaffolding will be removed, the debris cleaned up, the discarded building supplies taken away, the windows and floors polished, and the project delightful in its completion. Writes Newton:

Men, indeed, often plan what, for want of skill or ability, or from unforeseen disappointments, they are unable to execute: but nothing can disappoint the heavenly Builder; nor will he ever be reproached with forsaking the work of his own hands, or beginning that which he could not or would not accomplish (Phil. 1:6). Let us therefore be thankful for beginnings, and patiently wait the event.  

Grace finishes what the divine Architect planned. As the builder, grace never walks off the job or leaves the project unfinished. The Christian life is always progressing behind scaffolding and debris that clouds our vision and makes it difficult for us to gauge the work of grace in our lives and the lives of other Christians. Yet we are confident that grace executes the Architect’s blueprint. Newton is confident that even when it feels like the construction has stopped, grace continues to labor. This trust in the active work of grace in the Christian life helped Newton keep his trust in God when his spirits were low or when progress was obscured. The work of grace progresses from behind the scaffold, until the great unveiling (1 John 3:2). This event is on schedule and the infallible Architect will deliver the end product, all by grace.

All-Sufficient, Red-Letter Grace

While Newton is most famous for the phrase amazing grace, he much preferred the phrase sufficient grace. The two are not unrelated, but sufficient grace was more common in his vernacular because few (if any) Bible pas-
sages more clearly shaped his thinking of the Christian life than Paul’s testimony of grace in the Christian life in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10.

A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The Christian life is not comfortable. God makes us no promises to remove difficult circumstances, or alleviate our pains, or protect us from suffering, but he does promise sufficient grace for all our wants and needs. In his pain, Paul learned there is a full supply of grace for all God’s children. This is not merely adequate grace, but all-sufficient grace. No matter how large and daunting the circumstance or need, grace is always larger and stronger and more fully sufficient to meet each battle or trial in the Christian life.

Deeply moved by Paul’s words, Newton not surprisingly wrote multiple hymns on grace, including one titled “My Grace Is Sufficient for Thee.” In it he elaborates further on the perspective-altering power of God’s sufficient grace in light of the pains and struggles of the Christian life. The hymn opens with two verses of violent, descriptive words to recreate Paul’s desperation. If “Amazing Grace” gives us a macro-look at grace and the Christian life, “My Grace Is Sufficient for Thee” is a micro-look into how grace gets applied to the warfare in the Christian life.

Oppress’d with unbelief and sin,
Fightings without, and fears within;
While earth and hell, with force combin’d,
Assault and terrify my mind:

What strength have I against such foes,
Such hosts and legions to oppose?
Alas! I tremble, faint, and fall;
Lord, save me, or I give up all.
Paul faced physical pain and outward oppression in his ministry, but here Newton applies the passage to the violent spiritual assaults against temptations, indwelling sin, the flesh, unbelief, the world, and a host of demonic foes. All the Christian’s allied enemies crash on him at once. He trembles, he faints, and he falls to his knees. The combined force of the enemies quickly overwhelms the internal supplies of the Christian. In desperation, Newton cries out for deliverance.

Thus sorely prest, I sought the Lord,
To give me some sweet, cheering word;
Again I sought, and yet again;
I waited long, but not in vain.

Oh! ’twas a cheering word indeed!
Exactly suited to my need;
"Sufficient for thee is my grace,
Thy weakness my great pow’r displays."

The answer comes, but not immediately. And when it does arrive, the answer is not an alleviation of suffering, but the promise of all-sufficient grace to endure with joy. When sufficient grace breaks in, the entire mood of the hymn changes, even as the battles rage on. Notice how the hymn concludes with the mood-altering effect of this “awakening” to the sufficiency of God’s grace.

Now I despond and mourn no more,
I welcome all I fear’d before;
Though weak, I’m strong; though troubled, blest;
For Christ’s own pow’r shall on me rest.

My grace would soon exhausted be,
But his is boundless as the sea;
Then let me boast with holy Paul,
That I am nothing, Christ is all.\(^{21}\)

Only all-sufficient grace can account for the change of tone in this hymn. Grace alone is powerful enough to comfort Newton in his darkest trial, under the most persistent pain, and under attack on all fronts. God’s

solution to trials may not always be an escape from circumstances, but may be a stable and ever-present response from God to those who ask. *My grace is sufficient for you.* “Such an assurance was more valuable than the deliverance he sought could be.”

“I am nothing, Christ is all.” The all-sufficient grace of God provides us the context for discovering our insufficiencies. Grace welcomes us to look into our emptiness and personal weakness because our strength and security is outside of us, in God’s all-sufficient grace. Our owning of personal weakness is one of the results of the active presence of grace. And our weakness is how we broadcast the grace of God to others.

Look closely and you’ll notice something curious in 2 Corinthians 12:9. Red-letter Bibles print this verse in blood-red text. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness,” is a phrase from the lips of the Savior to Paul, pushing us closer to the heart of Newton’s theology, and closer to the heart of this book.

**No Such “Thing” as Grace**

The absence of the word *grace* from my book title and subtitle is not accidental. By personifying grace, “Amazing Grace” can be somewhat misleading to modern readers. It is certainly not wrong to put verbs after grace (e.g., Titus 2:11). Grace *saves* wretches. Grace *searches out* lost sinners. Grace *removes* spiritual blindness and *gives* spiritual sight. Grace *teaches* us to fear God. Grace *relieves* fear. But in our modern culture, where *grace* has become a synonym for *kindness*, “Amazing Grace” becomes a sort of hymn to the transforming power of niceness or, a little better, grace becomes abstracted divine benevolence. In either case, grace is depersonalized.

This misunderstanding of grace has led Sinclair Ferguson to go so far as to say there actually is no such *thing* as grace. It has led Michael Horton to declare that grace is “not a third thing or substance mediating between God and sinners, but is Jesus Christ in redeeming action.” Their point is the same. We must resist the temptation to morph grace into spiritual currency or some abstracted spiritual power that mysteriously ebbs and

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22 W, 2:316.

23 “Grace is not a ‘thing.’ It is not a substance that can be measured or a commodity to be distributed. It is ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor. 13:14). In essence, it is Jesus Himself” (Sinclair B. Ferguson, *By Grace Alone: How the Grace of God Amazes Me* [Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2010], xv).

flows. Grace is not dished out in spiritual gold coins of merit (a serious me-
dieval Roman Catholic error confronted in the Reformation). No. Thinking
of grace as spiritual currency is mistaken. To say there is no such thing as
grace means that all the grace we have and can ever hope to have—all the
sovereign grace, all the all-sufficient grace—is bound up in the favor of the
Father and in our union with the Son.

If you have Christ, you have all of Christ, and to have all of Christ is to
have free access to Christ’s all-sufficient grace. Grace is not a gate to fence
us back from Christ. Grace is not a substitute for Christ. Grace does not
stand between me and Christ. Rather, says Calvin, “All graces are bestowed
on us through Christ.” Grace is shorthand for the full and free access we
have to all the merits and power and promises to be found in the person
of our Savior (John 1:16–17; Eph. 2:7; 1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Cor. 8:9; 2 Tim. 2:1). Repeatedly, Newton accents “the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” Grace is a
stream from Christ, the fountain of all grace, he writes. The “water of
life” (Rev. 22:17) “stands for the communication of every grace from Jesus
Christ. He is the fountain (John 7:37–39). [The outpouring of grace] is com-
pared to water, for it is plenty. There is abundance of grace—a fountain, a
river, an ocean (Isa. 44:3).” For from his fullness we have all received,
grace upon grace,” writes the apostle John (John 1:16). “All the streams of
grace flow from Christ, the fountain,” Newton concludes.

In a letter to his eminent friend Hannah More, Newton wrote:

> When we understand what the Scripture teaches of the person, love, and
> offices of Christ, the necessity and final causes of his humiliation unto
death, and feel our own need of such a Savior, we then know him to be the
> light, the sun of the world and of the soul, the source of all spiritual light,
> life, comfort and influence; having access to God by him, and receiving out
> of his fullness grace for grace.

And thus, “we are gradually prepared to live more out of ourselves, and to

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28 W, 1:417. To be fair, Paul sometimes speaks of grace (χάρις) without mentioning Christ. In these cases he appears to be speaking of grace as a mobilizing force or a spiritual gift for certain tasks (see Rom. 1:5; 12:3; 15:15; 1 Cor. 3:10; 15:10; 2 Cor. 9:8; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 3:7–8; Phil. 1:7). But ultimately, all the grace that

gifts or mobilizes is a grace purchased in Christ and distributed by him (Eph. 4:7–8).
29 *Letters* (Bull 1869), 350.
derive all our sufficiency of every kind from Jesus, the fountain of grace.”30
Such dependence on Christ empowers us: “Oh, it is a great thing to be strong
in the grace that is in Christ Jesus!” (2 Tim. 2:1).31

In whatever ways our modern culture hears Newton’s hymn as an ab-
stracted and depersonalized divine blessing, his intent is clear. Christ “is
the Fountain, the Sun, the Treasury of all grace.”32 When Newton speaks of
grace, he is speaking of Christ in union with the believer. Newton’s grace
is ever “My grace,” a sovereign grace, all-sufficient grace, alone-sufficient
grace that flows freely and fully from the person of Jesus Christ. “By nature
we are separated from the divine life, as branches broken off, withered and
fruitless,” Newton writes. “But grace, through faith, unites us to Christ the
living Vine, from whom, as the root of all fullness, a constant supply of sap
and influence is derived into each of his mystical branches, enabling them
to bring forth fruit unto God, and to persevere and abound therein.”33 A life
in union with Christ is “the life of grace.”34

In our abiding union with Christ we find the context of the Christian
life. Grace not only connects us to Christ; grace is the daily motivation for
us to press closer toward Christ, to “be daily hungering and thirsting after
him, and daily receiving from his fullness, even grace for grace; that you
may rejoice in his all-sufficiency, may taste his love in every dispensation.”35
We seek more grace by seeking to experience more Christ.

Amazing Grace, Amazing Christ, Smoking Flax
Discovering the amazingness of grace requires that we focus on the amaz-
ingness of Christ in the theology and life of Newton. All we have is Christ.
Separated from him, there is no saving or sanctifying grace for the Chris-
tian life. United to Christ, there is full and free access to the full riches of
Christ, who is the fountain of all grace. Newton expressed this union per-
haps most fully and beautifully in his sermon on Matthew 11:27.

The great God is pleased to manifest himself in Christ, as the God of
grace. This grace is manifold, pardoning, converting, restoring, perse-
vering grace, bestowed upon the miserable and worthless. Grace finds the

31 W, 2:105.
32 365 Days with Newton, 236.
33 W, 1:322.
34 W, 4:333.
35 W, 6:47.
sinner in a hopeless, helpless state, sitting in darkness, and in the shadow of death. Grace pardons the guilt, cleanses the pollution, and subdues the power of sin. Grace sustains the bruised reed, binds up the broken heart, and cherishes the smoking flax into a flame. Grace restores the soul when wandering, revives it when fainting, heals it when wounded, upholds it when ready to fall, teaches it to fight, goes before it in the battle, and at last makes it more than conqueror over all opposition, and then bestows a crown of everlasting life. But all this grace is established and displayed by covenant in the man Christ Jesus, and without respect to him as living, dying, rising, reigning, and interceding in the behalf of sinners, would never have been known.

Grace is not currency dispensed from an impersonal, computerized ATM. Grace is deeply personal, it is glue, securing the branch of our Christian life into the trunk of Christ’s all-sufficiency. Grace binds us to the person of Christ, to his vital life, and to the full spectrum of his all-sufficient benefits. Before we learn from Newton about the common challenges of the Christian life, before we study the particular blemishes of Christian character, before we study his instructions to those who are discouraged and depressed, before we see his balm for the pain and trials and the insecurities Christians face, and before we can learn from him about trying to do business in the world, or about how to honor God in our marriages, or about how to deal with particular indwelling sins—before we look at any of these particulars, we must understand the root of all grace, Jesus Christ.

\[^{36}\text{W, 2:442.}\]