

"Amazing Grace"

LYRICS BY JOHN NEWTON,
WORDS FROM THE APOSTLE PAUL.
BOTH MEN . . .

CAPTURED *by*
GRACE

*No One is Beyond the Reach
of a Loving God*

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vi
Prelude: <i>The Hunters and the Hunted</i>	1

PART ONE: GRACE FOR THE PAST

1. The Captivating Presence of Grace	9
<i>Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound</i>	
2. The Compassionate Plan of Grace	27
<i>That Saved a Wretch Like Me</i>	
3. The Converting Power of Grace	47
<i>I Once Was Lost but Now Am Found</i>	
4. The Clear Perspective of Grace	65
<i>Was Blind, but Now I See</i>	
5. The Comforting Provision of Grace	81
<i>'Twas Grace That Taught My Heart to Fear and Grace My Fears Relieved</i>	
6. The Connecting Point of Grace	101
<i>How Precious Did That Grace Appear the Hour I First Believed</i>	

PART TWO: GRACE FOR THE PRESENT

7. The Confusing Paradox of Grace 123
*Through Many Dangers, Toils,
and Snares I Have Already Come*
8. The Confident Promise of Grace 145
*'Tis Grace Hath Brought Me Safe Thus Far,
and Grace Will Lead Me Home*

PART THREE: GRACE FOR THE FUTURE

9. The Compelling Prospect of Grace 167
*When We've Been There Ten Thousand Years,
Bright Shining As the Sun*
10. The Continual Praise of Grace 185
*We've No Less Days to Sing God's Praise
Than When We First Begun*
- Finale: *Captured Forever* 203
- Select Bibliography 209
- Notes 211

PRELUDE

The Hunters *and* *the* Hunted



The hooded figure climbs quietly from his mount, praying that his arrival has gone undetected. He soothes his horse as he hitches her to a post, perhaps one hundred feet from his target. The moonlight dances on the hilt of his sword as he approaches the building and turns to wait for his companions.

There are five of them in all, armed and prepared for any resistance. The men cluster tightly behind an old wall to review the situation and their plan. The target is an old potter's shop, seldom used today. The heretics obviously believe they can perform their illicit worship rituals here with impunity. They are about to learn otherwise.

"Wait for my signal," whispers the leader. "I will pound forcefully upon the door once; and when you hear my fist, you shout for all your lungs are worth. If we create shock and fear, these idiots are all the easier to overpower. Draw your swords and clubs, and don't hesitate to strike if anyone puts up a fight. But most of them are

probably women and children and elderly fools who will only whimper as we lead them away.”

The five of them creep to the door and the windows of the old shed. The leader places his ear to the door and hears the quiet cadences of prayer. They will be on their knees with eyes shut—the most perfect time imaginable. He throws his fist against the wood, almost splintering it, and five deep voices begin to roar and threaten and terrorize.

As the soldiers hurtle through the doorway, they see the little band of worshipers for the first time. They’re screaming in surprise and fear, of course. One infant begins to shriek. Several women begin to cry and cower, assuming the worst is in store for them. Five young men leap to their feet defensively. Yet the fools have brought no weapons at all. They had to know this was going to happen to them. The women restrain their men, who quickly realize the futility of striking back.

The chaos quickly fades to silence now, other than the sobbing of the inconsolable child. The soldiers bring their chains and begin clanging and shackling. One of the older women weeps quietly. Another does something very odd: she smiles at the leader. “I understand what you’re doing,” she says. “You’re serving God to best of your knowledge. If you could only see . . .”

“Shut up!” yells the leader, just managing to hold back his fist. “Don’t patronize me with your imbecilic faith. I have mastered the Law of God, and there is nothing you can teach me. Save it for the rats who have the run of your prison cell.” The woman looks at the floor, but there is no anger in her demeanor. Only a kind of resigned sadness.

The leader lingers behind as the Christians are led outside, from where they will be marched before the Council. He examines a crude wooden cross at the front of the room. What manner of insane cult

would select such an article of worship? The heritage of faith is purity, holiness—what could be more impure and polluted than an instrument of Roman torture for the dregs of society?

Their founder, the Nazarene, fully deserved his cross. But the Pharisee wonders why these eccentrics will risk the arrests and beatings they will now receive, on behalf of an odd rabbi who been dead for some time now (whatever wild claims they may make about his tomb).

Then the Pharisee stops and listens very carefully to the quiet night. What was that scurrying sound outside? A footstep? The others have been gone for several minutes, and no one else was in this area. He has checked it carefully.

Saul feels the beginning of a chill along his spine. This has happened before—more than once. He roots out the Christians; he does his job; he is reminded of their strange calmness, their—what is the word for it? Some kind of irrational mercy. And always, as Saul is reflecting over the oddity of it all, he hears—the footsteps.

In those moments, he experiences a strange inside-out feeling that *he* is the one who is pursued, and that someone or something else is doing the pursuing. It's irrational, of course. What possible sense could it make? He is God's champion, defender of the faith. All he can do is soldier on, keep doing his job, root out these infidels, capture them one by one. Capture their faith, capture their—yes, that's the word—their *grace*.



The captain strolls along the Charles Towne battery, on the coast of Carolina. He gazes out to sea and listens to the cry of the gulls, wiping the perspiration from his brow. What humid lands, these colonies—a kingdom of mud and mosquitoes. Already he is feeling

restless, impatient; if only he could busy himself with gathering the crew and loading the ship for the home voyage.

But there is business still to be done. That is the master purpose of every voyage, after all. One hundred sixty, perhaps one hundred seventy dollars per head. The final sum will be a comfortable one, providing that a good majority of the captives come ashore alive. On the last trip, nearly one-half of these Africans expired. There was hardly a profit to be made.

Yet the captain is not insensitive to such things. He would rather not be in attendance when the hold is opened and the tally is taken. This is the distasteful cost of doing business; the cargo must be packed tightly. It must be chained and disciplined. Some of the natives will die of various diseases, from whippings, or from the heat. Some will even refuse to take bread. It is an unpleasant state of affairs, but England must have its commerce; the colonies must have their workers for crops of rice and indigo.

Yesterday, the captain witnessed an auction at the slave mart. He cannot help but be disturbed by the cries of despair as children are parted from their mothers. After no more than a few minutes of this, he found he had to leave, to take a walk among the quieter streets. Let others keep the accounts and do the dickering.

As he strolls now by the seaside, he hears them again: footfalls directly behind him. The captain whirls quickly to find no intruder but the ocean wind. Once more, he reassures himself that his imagination is overactive. His restlessness must be to blame. He hasn't been sleeping well; there have been strange and unpleasant dreams.

And yet Captain Newton has felt it more and more on these business trips: a sense of being followed, of being watched. Even as he has pursued the fortune of slave trading, he has been unable to escape the feeling that it was *he* who was being pursued. Some steady

footstep always out of eyesight, some whispered voice just beyond his hearing . . .

“Something relentless,” John Newton mumbles to himself. “Something is pursuing us all.”

A decorative border of black line art surrounds the text. It features stylized, symmetrical floral motifs with teardrop-shaped leaves and circular elements, reminiscent of Art Deco or mid-century modern design. The motifs are arranged in a repeating pattern around the central text.

PART ONE

GRACE
for the
PAST

CHAPTER ONE

The Captivating Presence of Grace

Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound



It's autumn in New York. November 2004.
Freezing rain, weary drivers.
One carload of delinquents on a joyride.
Got the picture?

Their spree begins at the local cineplex. Bored with action flicks, the teenagers decide to act one out. They break into a car, grab a credit card, and proceed to a video store. There they charge four hundred dollars' worth of DVDs and video games.

Why not pick up a few groceries while they're at it? A surveillance tape catches the kids selecting a twenty-pound turkey.

Remember the turkey.

Pedal to the metal in a silver Nissan, the kids move along an irregular line intersecting with a Hyundai containing one Victoria Ruvolo. The two cars cross paths at approximately 12:30 a.m.

Victoria Ruvolo, forty-four, is heading for her Long Island home.

Having attended her fourteen-year-old niece's vocal recital, she looks forward to home and hearth—particularly hearth. She's ready to unravel the overcoat and scarves, burrow under an electric blanket, and rest her weary self.

Maybe the silver Nissan, approaching from the east, catches Victoria's eye—maybe not. Later, she won't be sure. She certainly won't recall the image of a teenage boy leaning out the window of the Nissan as the car approaches. Nor will she retain any memory of the bulky projectile taking flight from his hands.

This is the part about the turkey.

The twenty-pound bird crashes through Victoria's windshield. It bends the steering wheel inward, smashes into her face, and breaks every bone it encounters.

Victoria will remember none of this—frankly, a stroke of mercy. Eight hours of surgery and three weeks of recovery later, however, friends and family fill in the blanks. Victoria lies impassively in a bed in Stony Brook University Hospital and listens to every detail. Yet her emotions are difficult to discern, given the mask her face has become: shattered like pottery, now stapled together by titanium plates; an eye affixed by synthetic film; a wired jaw; a tracheotomy.

The public reaction is much more vigorous. The media has run with this story; weblogs follow every new detail of arrest and arraignment. Over Thanksgiving, New Yorkers whispered prayers of gratitude that they were not Victoria Ruvolo. Over Christmas, they cherished their health and their fortunes a little bit more than usual. Over the New Year, they cried out for justice.

Internet bloggers and TV pundits suggest what they'd do if they could be in a room for five minutes with those punks in the Nissan. They'd especially love to lay hands on Ryan Cushing, the eighteen-year-old who heaved the turkey. *His* face should be shattered. *His* life should lie in ruins. That's how the man in the street sees it.

But it's all in the hands of the justice system. On Monday, August 15, 2005, Ryan and Victoria meet face to restructured face in the courtroom. Nine agonizing, titanium-bolted months have passed since the attack. Victoria manages to walk into the courtroom unaided, a victory in itself.

A trembling Ryan Cushing pleads guilty—to a lesser charge. Sentence: a trifling six months behind bars, five years probation, a bit of counseling, a dash of public service. People shake their heads in righteous indignation. Is that all the punishment we can dish out? When did this country become so soft on crime? Let's lock up all these criminals and throw away the key.

Who is responsible for this plea bargain anyway?

The victim. That's who. The victim requests leniency.

Ryan makes his plea and then turns to Victoria Ruvolo, all the essence of tough guy long since drained away. He is weeping with abandon. The attorney leads the assailant to the victim, and Victoria holds him tight, comforts him, strokes his hair, and offers reassuring words. "I forgive you," she whispers. "I want your life to be the best it can be." Tears mingle from mask of reconstruction and mask of remorse.

It takes quite an event to bring tears to the eyes of New York attorneys and magistrates. This is such an event. TV and radio reporters file their stories in voices that for once are hushed and respectful. The *New York Times* dubs it "a moment of grace."¹

What do we do with such a story? It's beautiful, moving, inspiring—sure, all of those things. It's also *outrageous*. Why, it undermines every impulse of human nature, doesn't it? Let us be very honest. Would *you* have responded like Victoria Ruvolo? Surely you and I have been driven to a self-righteous frenzy over items far less dramatic. Some of us—some of the *best* of us—need one good incident on the expressway to bring out a snarl, a prolonged honking, a torrent of shouted invectives.

For that matter, remember when that fellow at work tried that little maneuver that really got your goat? You know the one—that petty little power play. How long did you seethe over that one? Or that woman at church who said that thing. Remember what she said and how you bristled? The look you gave her, and all that time you spent imagining what you'd like to say and do?

As for courtrooms, we've seen the opposite script play out. We've heard aggrieved families shouting at thugs as they stood to hear the verdict. And we've agreed with them, haven't we? It's just part of our constitution. Aren't we supposed to support justice and jeer at evil? Isn't it natural to affirm the process of punishing crime?

We're born that way. The smallest toddler retaliates to losing a toy to another child. She doesn't reclaim her toy calmly or dispassionately. She reacts in *outrage*. She seizes the plaything and shouts recriminations at its thief. It's all part of the human wiring. Work, church, playground—we're only human. We get mad *and* we get even.

Why, then, do we catch our breath upon observing behavior that precisely overturns these expectations?

Grace is shocking—something like the heavenly converse of a traffic accident. When love is returned for evil, we can't help stopping to rubberneck. Grace is the delivery of a jewel that nobody ordered, a burst of light in a room where everyone forgot it was dark.

Grace turns human politics on its head, right before our eyes. It renounces the entire conventional wisdom of social behavior. Grace suggests that human beings may be something more than honor graduates of the animal kingdom after all, that the rumors may be true that purity and goodness are real and alive.

Stories like that of Victoria Ruvolo transfix us for a moment. We find a smile, perhaps even shed a tear. It's like warming the soul at a hearth on a chilly night. Then it's right back to the struggle of the moment. We now resume our normal programming.

At least most of us do. Yet there are a rare few who find they cannot resume. The discovery of grace for them is like finding a knot-hole in the high gates of heaven. They cannot tear themselves away from peering into it. The light intoxicates their being. They wonder why, if this thing called grace is so magnificent—and if it is a standard option of every moment—why is it so rare and isolated? And urgently, pleadingly, the grace visionaries begin calling others to the knothole.

Such a man was the apostle Paul. He was once one of the seizers—the recriminators. These people, these Christians, had stolen his toy, and he was taking it back with a vengeance. They had laid hands on the faith of his fathers and polluted it. He would repay them with interest, galloping to far-flung regions just to torment them. That's when grace—or some Agent thereof—knocked him right out of the saddle, toppled his most precious assumptions, and took away his eyesight until he was ready to look hard at the thing he had refused to behold. And once his vision returned, that item was the only one he wished to see.

Paul changed his name and his person. He would write letter after letter to friends, to churches, to people he had never met—some who wouldn't be born for centuries. He spoke of many things in these letters, but he always came back around to the same theme: that moment of blinding grace on the Damascus Road, when sight came wrapped in blindness.

Our New Testament contains 155 references to grace; 130 of them come from the pen of Paul. The word opens, closes, and dominates every letter he wrote. It defines his teaching and his dearest hopes. Grace is the magnificent ideal by which he would measure his life and yours. The scourge of the martyrs has become the apostle of grace.

That's the startling power of one simple idea—the same power

that transformed a ruthless slave trader to a timeless troubadour of liberation. John Newton shared Paul's obsession. In his elder years, he would sit by the fireplace in his former vicarage study at Olney. His once raging soul was now at peace. Just the same, he never wanted to forget the other John Newton—the one who traded in human cargo. Like Paul, his earthly eyesight was failing in latter years, but he could read the large letters he had painted on the wall over his fireplace:

*Since thou wast precious in my sight,
thou has been honorable (Isaiah 43:4)*

BUT

*Thou shalt remember that thou wast a
bondman in the land of Egypt,
and the Lord thy God redeemed thee (Deut. 15:15).*

THE MELODY

It was John Newton's special joy as a pastor to craft sermons and hymns together. The Word and music were equally beloved to him, and he gave himself to both. For New Year's of 1773, he turned his attention to 1 Chronicles 17:16–17: "Then King David went in and sat before the LORD; and he said: 'Who am I, O LORD God? And what is my house that You have brought me this far? And yet this was a small thing in Your sight, O God: and You have also spoken of Your servant's house for a great while to come, and have regarded me according to the rank of a man of high degree, O LORD God.'"

The verses seemed to leap from the page before Newton's eye: *Who am I, Lord?* Why should King David, murderer and adulterer, receive the magnificent grace of God? Why should John Newton, trader of slaves? Such grace could only be described as amazing.

Yet the hymn that first emerged from Newton's pen might surprise the modern ear. For one thing, the melody was not the familiar one that has come down to the present day. It would be more than half a century before a man named William Walker would find just the right tune—a melody known as “New Britain.” In Newton's time, as many as twenty different melodies might be used interchangeably. Even that immortal title had yet to assert itself. The hymn's original title? “Faith's Review and Expectation”—not exactly catchy enough for the pop charts, then or now.

There were more verses than we often recognize too. Many people claim to know all the verses of “Amazing Grace” by heart, but can they sing the lines below? These originally followed the present third verse:

*The Lord has promised 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.*

But a verse is missing, isn't it? The one that may be your favorite. What about “When we've been there ten thousand years”? The closing stanza you and I know and love first appeared in 1909. Edwin

Othello Excell, himself a prolific composer, inserted the final piece in the puzzle, completing the standard version of the hymn. Excell replaced verses four, five, and six with four lines that John Newton never wrote. How did it happen?

In the year 1852, antislavery sentiment had come to a boil in America. Newton would have heartily approved. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared that year, including a version of "Amazing Grace" that added these lines:

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

Excell admired this version excerpt with its vision set in eternal glory. He grafted these new lines to the existing ones, and we've sung it that way ever since.

The English used the song on occasion. Across the sea in South Carolina, the hymn was first published with a melody. That hymnal, *The Southern Harmony*, sold an amazing six hundred thousand copies in 1850—two years before Excell added his "ten thousand."

Years came and passed, and so did new hymnals and musical fashions. "Amazing Grace" was one nice hymn among many until, of all things, the age of acid rock.

In 1970, when electric guitars and angry lyrics ruled the charts, folk singer Judy Collins released an audacious track: an a capella rendition of the old hymn "Amazing Grace." Without the drums, without the backbeat, the result was a revelation to young ears. By early 1971, the song was a hit in England and America. Finally, three recorded minutes that the elderly and their flower-child grandkids could listen to together.

Then in 2004, Bill Moyers produced an entire documentary about the song for public television. He paid tribute to the mysterious power of a simple hymn that had traveled so far with so many adventures. Judy Collins, reprising her hit, told of its support during her bout with alcoholism. Opera singer Jessye Norman rendered a concert version. Country singer Johnny Cash used it to connect with imprisoned criminals. The song cast its spell in many worlds, whether sung by the Boys Choir of Harlem, shaped-note choruses in the Appalachian foothills, or among Japanese worshipers.

The hymn is heard at Olympic ceremonies and presidential inaugurations. It is considered essential in a time of disaster; a crisis such as the one of September 11, 2001; or at any moment of somber mood. It has become a *de facto* national anthem for events of magnitude.

Shoppers at Amazon.com may choose from among 3,832 separate recordings of John Newton's old hymn. It comes in every style, crosses every line, and reaches any and every ear. And when it is announced in a church service, people stand a little taller to sing it. They lift their voices a bit higher. Some of them feel that, just for a moment, they are catching a glimpse through the gates of heaven.

THE MAN

St. Augustine wrapped a powerful thought in vivid imagery when he said, "God always pours His grace into empty hands." The hands of John Newton could not have been emptier.

His father commanded a merchant ship and was always at sea. His mother raised him the best she could, schooling him in Scripture and sacred song. Mother and son attended a chapel near the Tower of London. In a nation in which 99 percent of the people were affiliated with the Church of England, Elizabeth Newton insisted upon an independent congregation.²

Just before his seventh birthday, John Newton lost his mother. It didn't take the old captain long to remarry and dispatch the boy to a boarding school. His was a childhood out of a Dickens novel. Unwanted children were often abandoned and abused at such schools. John left school and returned home. The elder Newton shrugged, put his young son on a ship, and began taking him along on his travels.

By the age of seventeen, John Newton's world was the open sea. The world of the Spirit, as lovingly taught by his mother, had vanished over his horizon. For seven years he declined into rebellion. Like some today, he mixed and matched convenient ideas to create his own religion, making "a shipwreck of faith, hope and conscience." In his own words, his "delight and habitual practice was wickedness," and he "neither feared God nor regarded men." In short, he was "a slave to doing wickedness and delighted in sinfulness."³

After a short stint in the wartime navy, Newton decided the regimented military life was not for him. He left in search of his father in the belief that his father could secure his release. It proved a futile move, as the deserter was quickly captured. He took a public beating, was stripped of his rank as midshipman, and was placed in shackles. Finally he managed to get on an African-bound freighter. There, in the shadow of the Dark Continent, John Newton sought to be lost where he could not be found. He could abandon himself to a life of dissolution.

Newton took up with a Portuguese slave trader on the island of Plantain, just off Sierra Leone on the western coast. The man's African wife was hostile to her husband's new friend and forced him to eat scraps from her plate like a dog. His life and fortunes had reached low ebb. Perhaps he remembered a story his mother once read him—something about another rebellious son far from home, eating among the pigs.

Finally, John Newton was taken aboard a slave ship, where he was quartered with the captain. Then, in March 1748, somewhere in the North Atlantic, grace arrived. The hand of God rescued a shipwrecked soul. If it could happen to Paul on the road to Damascus, it could come to Newton on the voyage to Britannia. In chapter 6, we'll hear more of his conversion story.

Two years later, Newton was married. But just as the storm seemed over, he began to be troubled by fits and seizures that precluded a life at sea. So he stayed home and worked as a tide surveyor at the docks of Liverpool. With plenty of time on his hands, he began to fill in the great gaps of a childhood that provided little formal education. He studied Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac. He read classic theological works in Latin, English, and French. More and more, he found himself drawn to that old book that brought memories of his mother—the Christian Scriptures.

Then the people wanted a pastor. In 1754, he accepted a calling in Olney, where he would serve for sixteen years. At the next church, this time in London, he served God and men for twenty-eight years. An aging but contented man, at the age of seventy-two he marveled that “such a wretch should not only be spared and pardoned, but reserved to the honor of preaching the gospel, which he blasphemed and renounced.”⁴ He preached the Gospel until the venerable age of eighty-one.

The melody, however, lingers on.

THE MESSAGE

Man and melody—each sailed quite a journey. Newton's hymn, of course, has easily outlived him. People wonder at the power of “Amazing Grace.” What is so amazing about it? Like so many things, it defies the dissection we might give a frog in science class. We can't

quite discover the secret, for the notes are the same as those on any piano. The words are transcendent, but no more so than the stanzas of any number of other hymns—“Holy, Holy, Holy,” for example. No public relations firm has accounted for its influence. No pope or prelate has sanctified it. But there it is, a cherished piece of our lives.

Some have attempted to bottle its inspiration, filter its doctrine, and reduce it to an anthem of generic wellness. “Amazing Grace,” to some, is simply “a greater sense of consciousness” or “the power of human potential,” a “moment of intense awareness” or “experiencing the interconnectedness of all things.” It is “being aware of the unity of which we are all a part” or “the unseen forces that are all around us.” It is “relinquishing the ego,” “achieving mental clarity,” or “finding spiritual illumination.”

For M. Scott Peck it is “hidden in the 95 percent of our consciousness of which we are unaware.”⁵ For Judy Collins, it is “letting go, bottoming out, seeing the light, turning it over, trusting the universe, breathing in, breathing out, going with the flow.”⁶ For folk singer Joan Baez, “it’s a state I would like to be in for more than thirty seconds a day.”⁷ For Pete Seeger, “Grace means harmony . . . the law of gravity throughout the universe a kind of harmony . . . or the way that mathematics works.”⁸

We can only imagine what John Newton would make of all this—perhaps express bewilderment over such nebulous metaphysical puffery. He would point out that his verses do no more, and no less, than tell the old, old story—the one that never grows old. They tell of the loving father and the lost son. They speak of the incredible joy of salvation from the clutches of sin, of the amazingness of grace.

Perhaps it is not the song after all; perhaps it has never been the song but the idea—and the fact that this hymn is simply the one that best captures the lightning.

The lightning is grace. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones has written: “There is no more wonderful word than ‘grace.’ It means unmerited favor or kindness shown to one who is utterly undeserving. . . . It is not merely a free gift, but a free gift to those who deserve the exact opposite, and it is given to us while we are “without hope and without God in the world.”⁹

Someone has written that *grace* is a five-letter word that is often spelled J-E-S-U-S. For, if Newton’s hymn was the melody that embodied the idea, Jesus was the Man. He was the once-and-for-all, perfect human image of grace, of love, of truth. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:1, 14, 17).

In the Greek tongue of Paul’s day, the word for “grace” was *charis*. It carried the connotation of graciousness or favor. But the term evolved in the Greek world until it meant the actual gift, the concrete expression of kindness. Grace happens. As Paul explained it, “The free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many” (Romans 5:15).

Grace happens, and it acts. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8).

Such grace can come only from God. It is the gift unsought, unmerited, unlimited. For no matter what we have done, no matter the depth of our transgression, the darkness of our hearts—grace overrules them all. God pursues us relentlessly, He will not give us up, and once He has captured us, He won’t let us go.

These are the broad outlines of the great idea. Yet it is as if we

are mapping an uncharted territory—surveying the bounds of heaven, if you will. We can never take in the whole expanse. Grace is too dazzling, too bright, for it is powered by the holy heart of God. Trying to comprehend it in whole is like staring directly into one thousand suns.

Grace is as infinite and transcendent as the God from whom it flows. He is “the God of all grace” (1 Peter 5:10), and He is abounding with mercy for the merciless, help for the helpless, redemption for anyone and everyone. There is no limit to the throng of guests invited to dine at the Master’s overflowing table.

As Griffith Thomas has said, “All this in full measure and overflowing abundance, because of nothing in the object, and because of everything in the Giver, God himself.”¹⁰

Grace is the bridge over a chasm that seemed infinite—the canyon between our depravity and His holiness. That bridge is wide and sturdy and sure, beckoning to us to cross over into a life too wonderful for us to imagine.

THE MERCY

At the heart of the mystery is an essential concept: the idea of mercy. We must understand grace, at least within the limits of our comprehension; we must understand mercy. And we must be clear on how the two ideas intersect.

We often use the words as if they are synonyms—one and the same. In fact, there are passages in the New Testament that make that appear to be so. A few scholars have put forward the neat and simple proposition that the Old Testament uses *mercy* while the New Testament speaks of *grace*.

The truth is more elusive, like the words themselves. Think of it

this way: Mercy is God withholding the punishment we rightfully deserve. Grace is God not only withholding that punishment but offering the most precious of gifts instead.

*Mercy withholds the knife from the heart of Isaac.
Grace provides a ram in the thicket.*

*Mercy runs to forgive the Prodigal Son.
Grace throws a party with every extravagance.*

*Mercy bandages the wounds of the man beaten by the robbers.
Grace covers the cost of his full recovery.*

*Mercy hears the cry of the thief on the cross.
Grace promises paradise that very day.*

*Mercy pays the penalty for our sin at the cross.
Grace substitutes the righteousness of Christ for our wickedness.*

*Mercy converts Paul on the road to Damascus.
Grace calls him to be an apostle.*

*Mercy saves John Newton from a life of rebellion and sin.
Grace makes him a pastor and author of a timeless hymn.*

*Mercy closes the door to hell.
Grace opens the door to heaven.*

*Mercy withholds what we have earned.
Grace provides blessings we have not earned.*

In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean is a guileless, unassuming man until he is imprisoned during the French Revolution for stealing a loaf of bread, in order to feed his starving family. After completing nineteen years of hard labor, he is bitter and angry toward both society and God.

Monsignor Myriel, the seventy-four-year-old bishop of Digne, has also suffered greatly during the Revolution. All that remains of the bishop's aristocratic heritage are six knives and forks, a soup ladle, and two candlesticks. His experience has taught the bishop compassion for the indigent, and he ministers to them as a humble servant.

After four days of freedom, with repeated denials of food or shelter, the weary and hungry Valjean becomes a desperate man. He arrives at the door of the bishop of Digne. The hardened Valjean brashly storms into the home of the bishop, where he is confounded by the warm welcome he receives. That night, while the household is asleep, Valjean leaves the first mattress and sheets he has known in nineteen years and stealthily fills a knapsack with the bishop's treasured silverware and disappears into the darkness.

When the police arrive in the morning with the shackled Valjean, the bishop collaborates his claim that the silver has been given to him. The bishop asks the police to release Valjean and says to him, "I'm glad to see you. But I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver like the rest . . . Why didn't you take them along with your cutlery?"

Incredulously, Valjean asks the bishop, "They're letting me go?"

The bishop assures him that he is free and adds, "My friend, before you go away, here are your candlesticks; take them." Then he adds, "Do not forget, ever, that you have promised me to use the silver to become an honest man . . . Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God."

Troubled by the grace offered to him, Valjean spends hours reflecting on the contrast of the darkness in his own soul with the harsh light of love that has penetrated his bitterness. “One thing was certain, though he did not suspect it, that he was no longer the same man, that all was changed in him.” The bishop had “filled the whole soul of this miserable man with a magnificent radiance.”

Twenty-four hours after his theft, Valjean returns to the scene of his crime and is observed “kneeling in prayer, on the pavement, in the dark, before the door of” the gentle bishop.

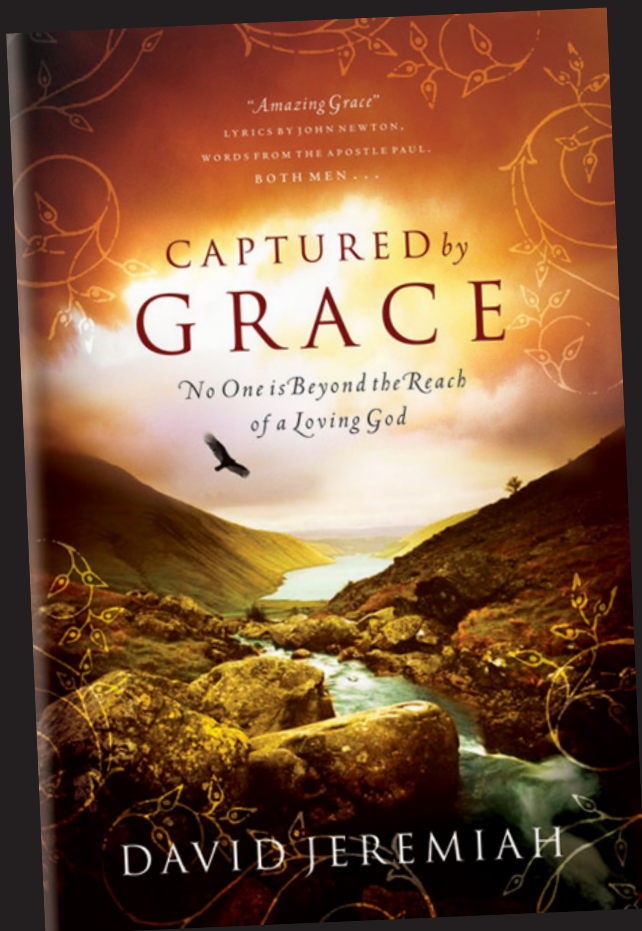
A moment of grace can change a lifetime. In fact, a moment of grace can change an eternity.¹¹

Moments of Grace



If you're suffering from guilt or a slip-sliding self-image, skim back over chapter 1 and underline the phrases that most impress you, like: *I forgive you . . . God always pours His grace into empty hands . . . Unmerited favor . . . Unlimited . . . Grace is a five-letter word spelled J-E-S-U-S . . . Grace is a bridge over a chasm that seemed infinite . . .* Then choose one particular underlined statement and turn it into a prayer, asking God to make you a recipient of His amazing grace and a conveyer of it to others.

Ask yourself, "How can I be more like Victoria Ruvolo, who forgave her assailant and wanted his life to be the best it could be?" Is there someone you can forgive today? And as you close this chapter, don't forget to sing! Every time you close this book, walk away with a few bars of "Amazing Grace" playing in your mind or floating from your lips.



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