

## **“Amazing Grace”**

John 1:14; Romans 3:24

A Sermon for the Season of Lent

“Amazing Grace” is today the best-known Gospel song around the world. As you may remember, it was sung at the re-opening of Notre Dame Cathedral back in December 2024. We talked about it then. Because it is the best-known Gospel song, it’s important that we remember why it’s a mixed blessing.

It’s a hymn that has not been in our Lutheran hymnals, that is, in the old Lutheran hymnals before the LBW. It is in both the Baptist and Methodist hymnals although they sometimes include the fifth verse: “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.”

Because “Amazing Grace” is relatively new among us, it’s useful to ask ourselves: Why didn’t we have it before?

It’s not the only hymn with a problem. Other more traditional hymns have problems, too. For example, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,” says in the third verse: “We wither and perish but naught changeth thee.” It states that God never changes. But that’s not true. God became a human being and died and rose among us. That’s the biggest event in all of history.

When we talk about God never changing, we use that verse from Hebrews 13:8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” That’s something quite different. That is that which never changes, and that’s because God changed.

What do we say about “Amazing Grace”? John 1:14 states: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” We have here “grace.” God became the Word to us.

And Romans 3:24: We “are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Words are tricky. They can change their meaning over time. The word “bully” dates back to the 1530’s, Luther’s time. It used to mean “sweetheart” or “darling,” but over the course of 500 years, it’s changed considerably, now meaning someone who is threatening or cruel to others. Words have a way of slipping in their meaning.

Grammar changes, too. Think of the verb “sneak.” That’s the present tense, and what’s the past tense? We say: “He snuck around the house.” The traditional past tense of sneak is sneaked, but the language is shifting and now “snuck” is acceptable. That’s what happens to language. It changes over time.

What do we do with the word “grace”? It has many similar meanings. It means goodness, gracious, as in: She’s a gracious host. He is grateful. “Grace” is a good name for a woman.

All these variations come out of the same Latin word group or word family. When we ask what grace is, we're not just playing with words. What we're really asking: What is salvation?

Salvation is the only question for all of us.

Here in this hymn, we have the first verse which sounds a lot like Paul. It has these contrasts: I was a wretch and I was saved. I was lost; I was found. I was blind, now I see.

It's like the Gospel of John about the man born blind and Jesus says: "For judgment I came into the world that those who do not see may see . . ." (John 9:39).

What is this "grace" business because the word is used 5-7 times in the hymn?

It's amazing. It's precious. It has a sweet sound. It's good. They are all adjectives with an evocative, abstract way about them. What are we saying when we say this?

A teacher once told her class: Each of you make a list of the seven wonders of the world. The kids came up many things: the Great Wall of China, the pyramids in Egypt, the Eifel tower, St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, the Grand Canyon, the Taj Mahal, the Panama Canal, etc.

But there was a girl who didn't say anything, and the teacher asked her: "What's the problem?" She said: "I've got too many on the list: I see, I hear, I taste, I touch, I feel, I think, I hope, I love, I laugh."

That changes the whole picture. What are the wonders of the world?

What are the problems with the kind of thinking about grace we find in this Gospel song?

There are some evangelical churches which teach: No matter what happens, you should say: "Thank the Lord!" If your car breaks down, thank the Lord! If you win the lottery, thank the Lord! If you break your leg, thank the Lord! But that's crazy.

The trouble is that we forget how to sort it out because if everything is grace, nothing is grace. Everything is the same thing. We ended up thinking grace is "sloppy agape." That's what happens. Everything is grace. There is no distinction between nature and grace, between good and evil, all is grace.

That brings us to the second thing we need to think about. We tend to end up in blurry abstractions. In the third verse it says: "Grace taught my heart to fear," and then "grace will lead me home." What is it talking about? What is this grace? What happens is that we end up in a big abstraction.

When we look at the great tradition of Catholic theology in the Middle Ages, we see that they talked about many kinds of grace: Supernatural grace and natural grace, created

grace and uncreated grace, condign grace and congruous grace, prevenient grace and grace that is here now.

What happens in this thinking is that nature and grace blur together into all kinds of grace because then you can manipulate it in any way you want. That's what happens.

We end up saying: "It's grace." There was a preacher, a large man with long limbs, who loved to stand in front of his congregation, open wide his arms and bellow: "Everything is grace!"

But then the question: "What is grace?" In that sense Hindus say: "Everything is grace." The same is often true for spirituality movements that pop up from time to time. They often set up grace against evil, but it's really spirit against matter where everything is grace.

We want to be fair to the hymn "Amazing Grace." It does say: "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved," but still: "What is it talking about?"

It's very much like the modern parable, "Footprints in the Sand," that you might see on a plaque in a Christian bookstore. You know how it goes. The author says that he knows God had been with him, and he could see evidence like footprints in the sand.

Sometimes there are two sets of footprints, but at other times there are only one set of footprints, and he asks the Lord: "What's that about?" The answer comes: "When things was bad, I carried you." People have the idea that that's what it's about.

It's a good example of why we need to talk about this hymn, "Amazing Grace," and why we need to talk about salvation.

We Lutherans have traditionally summarized who we are by the Reformation *solas*, the alones: "Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, word alone, cross alone." These are the basic ways we describe who we are and what we are about.

There's no question that that modern parable, "Footprints in the Sand," is a way of saying: "Grace alone." It's clear that God is doing something. He does it all. It's not our work, not our merit. Fine. It's also clear that it's "by faith alone." It's not anything we do. Not our merit.

But look at what happens in the hymn in the second verse: "How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!" That's where this gospel song really becomes a problem because it says: "I did it!" "I believed!" It tends to be Baptist. In that tradition "faith" is my response, my "Yes" to God. In other words, to be saved, we have to do something to make it work.

But that's not right. The cross shows us that sin is so serious and deep in us that God has to reach down and rescue us in spite of ourselves—apart from anything we are, think, say, or do (Smalcald III/III/36).

That's why infant baptism is the perfect example of faith and salvation. As Luther writes: "The Lord rescues us from the jaws of the devil" (LC 4/83). The Lord gives faith and salvation in Baptism, at whatever age we are baptized. Adult Baptism is just delayed infant Baptism.

In the Small Catechism we say: "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in truth faith." He gives me faith, and he does it. It's a basic point.

But that's not the real problem with "Amazing Grace." It's also not the real problem with the modern parable, "Footprints in the Sand."

The real problem has to do with the fact that the cross isn't mentioned.

Without the cross, there is no Christianity. When you look at this hymn, "Amazing Grace," the cross is not mentioned.

We have a real problem because the cross is really what grace is about. It is something God does. It is not an abstraction, not an idea about loving and God showing us he is loving. No, this is what God does. On the cross, he defeats sin, death, and evil.

The *solas* or the alones, taken individually are each a kind of heresy or error. But working together they show what salvation is about. Here's what we mean:

If you say "Christ alone" by itself, that's heresy because "Christ alone" is in itself an empty vessel, ready to be filled with whatever someone says.

If you say "grace alone" by itself, that's heresy. Even the Hindus say that. Grace alone, whatever it is, is a fuzzy abstraction.

If you say "faith alone," by itself, that's heresy, because then you have faith in faith.

If you say "the cross alone" by itself, that's heresy, because the cross by itself it's a tragedy.

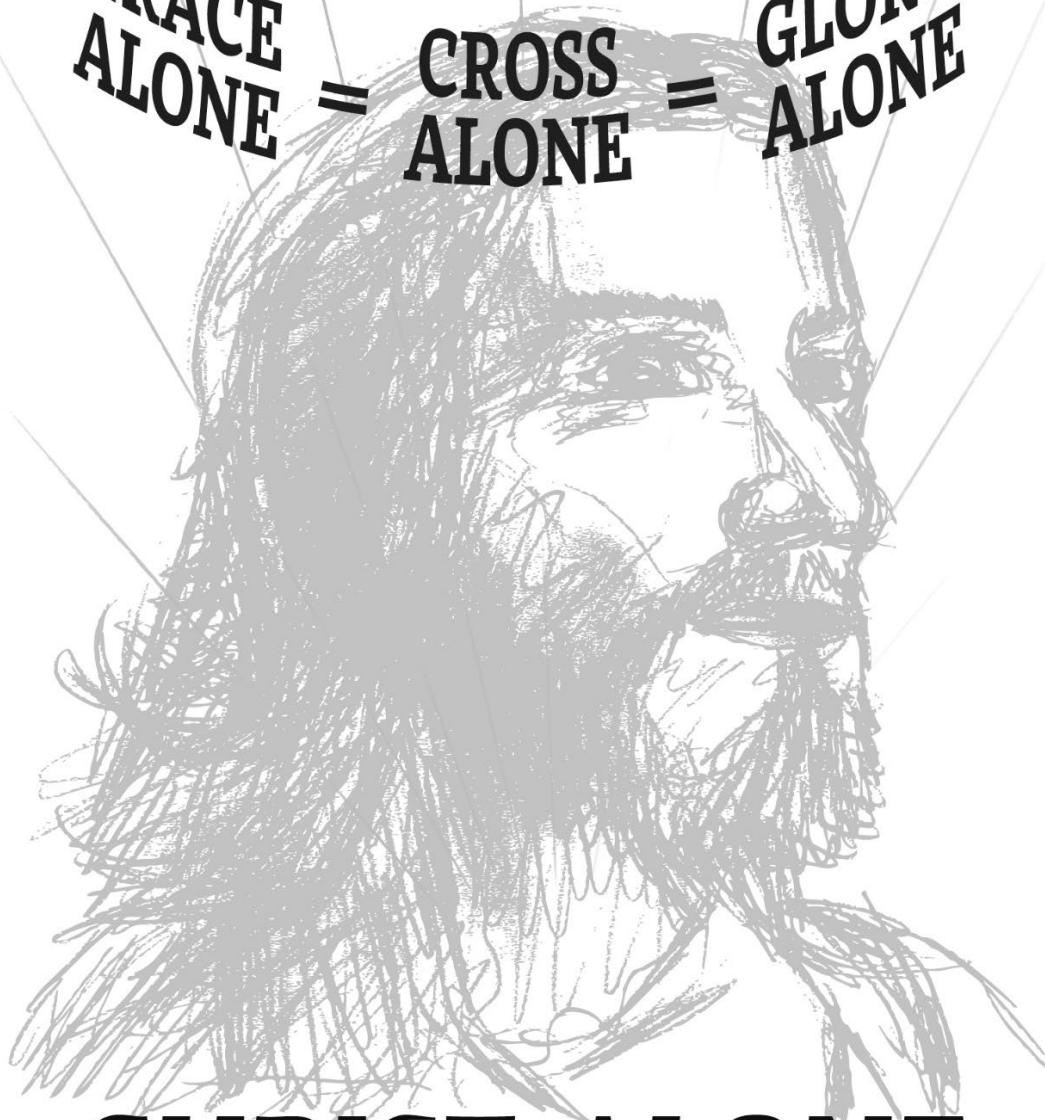
If you say "the word alone," or "by preaching alone," that's the error of thinking that a sermon is mechanical and magical and that any Bible-based preaching will do.

But working together, the *solas* show what salvation is about. Think of them this way:

Picture the head of Christ with a corona or crown of the *solas* over his head. They all work together as one dynamic, pointing to Christ alone. That is what salvation is about.

We end as we began: "Amazing Grace," for better and for worse, is the most popular Gospel song of our time. There's really nothing we can do about that. But we can remember and point out to others that grace is only grace because of what God does on the cross. Amen

SCRIPTURE ALONE = FAITH ALONE = WORD ALONE  
GRACE ALONE = CROSS ALONE = GLORY ALONE



**CHRIST ALONE**