

1] The hymn, Amazing Grace, was popularised among evangelical Protestant Christians. The words were written by John Newton, an Anglican clergyman who died in 1807. Newton lived just long enough to see the slave trade abolished throughout the British Empire, which must have been greatly gratifying for him, as he was an ardent abolitionist. Born in 1725, Newton had led what we might call, an interesting life. He had gone to sea as a young age and became engaged in the slave trade. Indeed, during his adventures he himself had become a slave at one point in Sierra Leone. But surviving a life-threatening storm at sea, he began to change his life. He eventually settled down, married, and was, in time, ordained in the Church of England.

2] Newton became an ardent abolitionist, campaigning against the very trade that he had once engaged in as a sailor. His own conversion to Christ, a gradual process, he eventually expressed in the famous hymn, Amazing Grace. The first lines of the hymn begin,

‘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.’

3] Most of us might not have had such an adventurous life as John Newton; we might not even have been so wayward and profane in our youth. But on the wide scale of human spiritual experience, each of us, as Orthodox Christians, should be able to identify, at least to some extent, with these words.

4] It was also, of course, the same experience of grace in the life of the great St Paul. It is, perhaps, all too easy in religion to think only upon the glorified image of God’s holy ones. We see in the holy icons the transfigured forms of a great cloud of witnesses. But it is, nevertheless, salutary for us to recall their back stories. Yes, there are those who were brought up in piety and were close to God all

their lives, but there were also those, like St Paul, who had been at enmity with Christ; who had resisted the grace of God.

5] I say that this is salutary and helpful because it reminds us that God's saints were people like us. They shared our human condition. They were consubstantial with us; of the same nature as us. Like us, they bore the old, fallen Adam; they too were tempted; they too were faced with same ascetic struggle of having to take up the cross and follow Christ on the road to salvation.

6] St Paul in the epistle today reminds Timothy of one of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity: that Christ was incarnate in that same human condition, in order to save sinners. He became like us, that we might become like him. Though innocent of all sin Himself, he took the price of Sin, that is Death, upon Himself, and rising from the dead, saved us from the damning effects of our sins. This is the mystery of redemption. It is why we gather here as the Orthodox people of God, each Lord's Day, to offer this same sacrifice of praise in the mystery of the Lord's body and blood.

7] Remembering his part in trying to destroy the apostolic Church as it began its mission, Paul, in the first century, like John Newton in the eighteenth century, saw himself as a wretched soul; 'And I am the foremost of sinners,' he says. We might call to mind the words of preparation we recite before receiving the Holy Gifts: 'I believe, O Lord, and I confess that thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the living God, who didst come into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.'

8] You see! All Orthodox Christians who dare approach the holy chalice must not only believe that, here, they are addressing Christ Himself, present in the Holy Gifts, but also, according to what St Paul, and all the apostles, taught, that Christ came to save sinners. And not only that but we add, '...of whom I am chief.' Let us be honest, though. Logically, how can each one of us be the chief of sinners? Were there not greater villains and rogues, scoundrels and evildoers than us in history? Yes, of course there were, and hordes of them who never repented and became lost souls. The answer to this paradox is that we do not sin in Christ, for there is no sin in Christ.

When we sin, we sin alone, within our own soul, which is why we find amazing grace in the mystery of Confession where, from time to time, we are reconciled to Christ and His Church.

9] Paul tells Timothy that he, the wretched one, was afforded the grace of God for a reason that in him, the foremost sinner, the most wretched, Christ could show His patience with the sinner, giving an example to all believers. The mode of John Newton's life was changed by grace, and certainly, that of St Paul was, who even poured out his life as an offering to God at the very end.

10] But what of our wretchedness, our unworthiness? Sin is, in fact, alien to our created nature, made in the image of God, just as Death, the fruit of Sin, is also alien to our nature and not part of God's making. Orthodoxy does not teach what the Protestant Reformer, Calvin, supposed: that mankind in his very nature, is utterly wretched and depraved, and that only the predestined elect will be saved by irresistible grace - a truly horrible idea!

11] No, our wretchedness does not apply to our human nature, not our essence, for we are God's creation and creation is good. But our wretchedness, any unworthiness that within us lies, is not part of that nature, the *ousia* in Greek, that we share in Adam, but is bound up with our particular person, *hypostasis* in Greek. We cannot plead our mere humanity before God as an excuse for our sins. We share Adam's nature, not his guilt, and it is from our Free Will that, individually, we fall from grace and re-enact our own expulsion from paradise. As is expressed in the *Kontakion* of the Prodigal Son that we shall be singing before too long: 'I have sinned before Thee, O merciful Father. Receive me who repent and make me as one of Thy hired servants.'

12] But how do we come to see things this way? Whether someone is still currently outside the grace of God, or has been a follower for many years, how are we enlightened, how do we repent, that is, how do we change our mind and take on the Mind of Christ? Let us return to John Newton's hymn: 'I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see.' The debilitating physical condition of blindness, like that of deafness, has often been cited as a metaphor to describe

a closed mind and a refusal to admit the truth. At one level, in the gospel today, Our Lord restores the sight of that man on the road to Jericho. But something more changed as well; the man received more than eyesight to find his way through the world: he also found insight, for as the text says he, 'Followed Him, glorifying God.' Grace had supplied the man with faith to believe that he could be healed, but that would be temporal, only for this world and this life. But much more than that: one of the lost of Old Israel had been restored to communion with God.

13] Each of us, too, must recognise the role of this amazing grace in our lives. This, after all, is the beginning and foundation of our own spiritual experience, our Life in Christ. At a baptism in the Orthodox Church the prayer offered before the candidate is sealed with the grace of the Holy Spirit in Chrismation, says that God, unworthy though we be, '...hast been graciously pleased to regenerate Thy servant that hath newly received Illumination by water and the Spirit, and grantest unto him remission of sins, whether voluntary or involuntary.' Those sins are not just those of someone's past life, but His grace, always going before us, is ever open to us whenever we repent from now on.

14] None of us engages in this struggle unaided; even if we do indeed commit all sin outside the way of Christ, still, no one need feel isolated. For the paradigm of the life of grace herself, the Theotokos is interceding for us. As we sing in the Troparion in the Paraklesis Service in her honour, 'To the Theotokos let us run now most earnestly, we sinners all and wretched ones, and fall prostrate in repentance, calling from the depths of our souls: Lady, come unto our aid, have compassion upon us; hasten thou for we are lost in a throng of transgressions; turn not thy servants away from empty hands, for thee alone do we have as our only hope.' Seeing this with open eyes, once lost, but finding our way once again, we can say with St Paul, 'To the King of Ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory to the ages of ages. Amen.'