**The Story & Theology of Particular Hymns**

Lesson 3 – John Newton: “Amazing Grace” (#460) & “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken” (#345)

**Biography**

* 1725-1807
* Born in London
* Mother died when he was 7
* Began traveling with his sea-captain father at 11 and did that for 18 years
* Known in England as one of the most vulgar and blasphemous of men
* He worked for slave-traders collecting slaves from West Africa and eventually became captain of his own slave ship
* Converted in 1748 at the age of 23after reading *Imitation of Christ* during a particularly stormy voyage when it appeared they were all going to perish
* Continued the slave trade after conversion by seeking to improve the conditions
* The inhumanity of it all eventually became too much and left to settle down.
* Married Mary Catlett in 1750 and became a port clerk.
* Ordained at 39 in the Anglican Church and his first pastorate was in Olney (near Cambridge) where he labored for 15 years with much fruit and influence.
* He preached both in his church and would hold extra services in any large building he could secure
* Began writing his own hymns because there were not enough hymns available for his church services.
* Together with his friend, William Cowper, they produced the *Olney Hymns* hymnal which is one of the most important single contributions to hymnody.
* After Olney, Newton pastored St. Mary Woolnoth Church in London.
* The same year that Newton died, England abolished the slave trade.
* One of his most-well known quotes came near the end of his life: “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: ‘That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!’”
* His tombstone is engraved with the following: “John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, but the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy.”

**Occasion for “Amazing Grace”**

* Obviously, this hymn is written as a testimony of God’s dealing with John Newton in converting him. Also, it was one of the hymns Newton wrote for more “heart-felt” singing in worship. Finally, he often used his personal testimony to great effect in his sermons.
* Written at least by 1779

**Theology of “Amazing Grace”**

* The entirety of the hymn is focused on God’s grace to believers from beginning to end. It’s God’s grace that converts a person. It’s God’s grace that guides us through the hardships of life. It’s God’s grace that gives us perseverance to endure. It’s God’s grace that sees us through to the end and ushers us into glory.
* One verse that is not included in most hymnals: “The earth shall soon dissolve like snow, the sun forbear to shine; But God, who called me here below, will be forever mine.”
* 1 Chronicles 17:16-17 – “Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and said, “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? **17**And this was a small thing in your eyes, O God. You have also spoken of your servant’s house for a great while to come, and have shown me future generations, O Lord God!”
* Ephesians 2:8-9 – “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **9**not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

**Occasion for “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”**

* This hymn is from Part 1 of Newton/Cowper’s *Olney Hymns* which contained hymns based on Scripture texts. Again, it’s a hymn that Newton wrote for use in corporate worship in place of Psalms.
* It is said to be the only (or most) joyful hymn in the entire collection.

**Theology of “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”**

* In the Old Testament, the city of Zion was the place where God dwelt among His people. It was a haven of refuge, a treasured place. In our New Testament age, Zion refers to the church.
* The focus of the hymn is a description of God’s protection of His chosen people –Jew and Gentile. God promises to supply the needs of His people and to lead them as He led the Israelites by cloud and fire in the OT.
* One verse that is not included in most hymnals: “Blest inhabitants of Zion, washed in the Redeemer’s blood! Jesus, whom their souls rely on, makes them kings and priests to God. ‘Tis His love His people raises, over self to reign as kings, and as priests, His solemn praises each for a thank-off’ring brings.”
* Psalm 87:3 – “Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God.”
* Isaiah 33:20-21 – “Behold Zion, the city of our appointed feasts! Your eyes will see Jerusalem, an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be plucked up, nor will any of its cords be broken. **21**But there the Lord in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor majestic ship can pass.”