Amazing Grace: A Theological Examination

Participant breakout guide • Application after instruction on Soteriology • 21 minutes

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: How accurately does Amazing Grace communicate the biblical doctrine of salvation?

Learning goal

Evaluate theological claims in a familiar hymn using biblical evidence; distinguish what the hymn teaches from what it does not fully address; communicate a concise, reasoned conclusion.

Historical context: John Newton and the slave trade

John Newton (1725–1807) participated in the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. After a religious awakening during a storm in 1748, he continued in the trade, serving as a first mate and later commanding slave ships through 1754. His awakening did not immediately lead him to reject slavery. He later became an Anglican minister and an opponent of the slave trade; in 1788 he published Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade. His hymn, written around 1772 and first published in 1779, should not be mistaken for a song composed at the moment he renounced slave trading.

Historical reflection: Newton's life raises difficult questions about the relationship between professed faith, repentance, moral blindness, and the continuing work of sanctification. The suffering and humanity of enslaved Africans must not be minimized when discussing his later change.

Hymn and biblical texts!

Read the first three stanzas of John Newton's original hymn, "Faith's Review and Expectation" (commonly called "Amazing Grace"), from a provided hymnal or the Library of Congress source. Use the biblical passages assigned to your room. The hymn is a poetic testimony, not a complete systematic theology.

Zoom format: 90 participants / 15 rooms – 6 individuals per room

Rooms 1–5 • Lens A	**Human condition: sin and the need for salvation**
Rooms 6–10 • Lens B	Means of salvation: grace, faith, justification
Rooms 11–15 • Lens C	Results of salvation: sanctification and assurance

Breakout instructions — 10 minutes

- Assign a facilitator, timekeeper, and spokesperson (one person may serve multiple roles).
- Read your assigned lens and discuss the hymn in light of Scripture. Everyone should contribute.
- Prepare ONE report of no more than TWO MINUTES using: CLAIM (what the hymn says) → EVIDENCE (biblical passage) → CONCLUSION (your evaluation). Every room must be ready to report.
- Consider whether the historical context complicates, qualifies, or deepens your understanding of grace and transformation.

Selection process: Each of the 15 rooms chooses a spokesperson and prepares its response. All rooms must be ready. After the breakout, the instructor randomly draws one room number from each lens (1–5,

6–10, and 11–15). Three spokespersons report; the other rooms submit their conclusions in Zoom chat. This is a room selection, not a selection of individual participants.

Lens A — The human condition (Rooms 1–5)

Scripture: Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23. Focus on the hymn's description of a person in need of grace.

- What does the hymn claim about humanity's spiritual condition?
- How do these biblical passages explain why salvation is necessary?
- What does Newton's continued involvement in slave trading after 1748 reveal about the danger of confusing religious experience with complete moral transformation?

Lens B — The means of salvation (Rooms 6–10)

Scripture: Ephesians 2:8–9; Romans 5:1. Focus on grace, faith, and justification.

- What does the hymn identify as the source of salvation?
- How do grace and faith relate to justification?
- What essential role of Jesus Christ in salvation must Scripture supply beyond the hymn's poetic language?

Lens C — The results of salvation (Rooms 11–15)

Scripture: Philippians 1:6; Titus 2:11–12. Focus on ongoing grace and changed living.

- How does the hymn depict grace beyond the initial experience of faith?
- How are sanctification and assurance different from justification?
- How might Newton's delayed opposition to the slave trade challenge simplistic accounts of sanctification?

Random selection, whole class debrief, and exit check

5 minutes: One 60-second spokesperson report from each lens; instructor synthesis. 3 minutes: Each participant posts a brief response in Zoom chat: "Name one theological truth about salvation expressed in the hymn, support it with Scripture, and identify one important aspect that the hymn does not fully explain."

Discussion norm

Evaluate ideas with Scripture; do not assume a hymn is exhaustive theology. Discuss Newton's history with historical accuracy and moral seriousness. Distinguish an explanation of delayed change from an excuse for participation in slavery.

Historical reading

Library of Congress, "The Creation of Amazing Grace" — https://www.loc.gov/collections/amazing-grace/articles-and-essays/creation-of-amazing-grace/

Cowper & Newton Museum, "Life of John Newton from Available Primary Sources" — https://cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/John-Newton-Enslaver-to-Abolitionst-Teachers-Resources-Final.pdf

National Portrait Gallery, "John Newton" — https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp53745/john-newton