Amazing grace—how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found—was blind, but now I see.

The Lord has promised good to me; His Word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come;
‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

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’d first begun.
(Christian Worship: 378—Note: Verse 4 was not written by John Newton)

This morning we’ll begin a sermon series on some of the great hymns in our hymnal. Once a month for the next 7 months we’ll take a closer look at one of the hymns in our hymnal.

We’ll learn a few facts about the people who wrote those hymns, and in some cases, the circumstances they were facing that prompted them to write them. But most important of all, we’ll take a closer look at the portion of God’s Word those hymns are based on, and what God is saying to us.

This morning’s hymn is one of the best-known Christian hymn of all time: “Amazing Grace.”

If I were to ask you what portion of God’s Word inspired the hymn “Amazing Grace”, if I were to ask you on what portion of God’s Word “Amazing Grace” is based, I would probably get a few different answers. I would imagine that many of you would guess Ephesians 2:8-9—“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith…”

I would be surprised if any of you would guess the correct answer. It’s based on verses 16-17 of 1 Chronicles 17. The time was about 1000 B.C. David had just completed construction of a beautiful palace for himself, made of cedar wood. As David settled into his beautiful house, he realized something. We read, “After David was settled in his palace, he said to Nathan the prophet, ‘Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of the covenant of the Lord is under a tent.’” (1 Chronicles 17:1)

You might recall that during the Israelites’ time in the wilderness the house of God had been a tabernacle, a tent-like building that could be taken down and moved to a new location. Now that the Israelites were truly settled in and in control of the Promised Land of Israel, David thought that God should have a more permanent place to live—a new place, a place that wasn’t (by this time) hundreds of years old.
“Nathan replied to David, ‘Whatever you have in mind, do it, for God is with you.’” (1 Chronicles 17:2)

It’s no wonder that Nathan gave his approval to David’s idea. It was clearly an idea that was motivated by a love for God and a desire to honor him as a great God. As for David, one wonders if he was even able to sleep that night. Think of when you are hit with a brilliant gift idea for someone that you love—a gift that will perfectly express your love for them, a gift that you’re sure they will appreciate. One could imagine the ideas flooding through his head that night—design ideas, decoration ideas, ideas, ideas, ideas of ways in which he would be able to show his awe, his reverence, and especially his love for God.

But God had different ideas, and therefore, “That night the word of God came to Nathan, saying:

‘Go and tell my servant David, “This is what the Lord says: You are not the one to build me a house to dwell in. I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought Israel up out of Egypt to this day. I have moved from one tent site to another, from one dwelling place to another. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their leaders whom I commanded to shepherd my people, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” (1 Chronicles 17:3-6)

You can imagine David being crushed when he heard these words. Or perhaps he was tempted to even be a little bit angry with God—feeling as though God was rejecting both David and his love for God.

But God had more to say to David through Nathan: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock, to be ruler over Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name like the names of the greatest men of the earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also subdue all your enemies.

“I declare to you that the Lord will build a house for you: When your days are over and you go to be with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.” (1 Chronicles 17:7-14)

Had David been wallowing in self-pity and hurt feelings, he would have missed God’s words of comfort here. He would not have heard God’s promises of amazing grace. But David heard and understood God’s words.

Did you hear them? God didn’t just say “No!” to David. Instead he said, “David, you’re not going to build a house for me. Instead I’m going to build a house for you! And it’s not going to be a physical house which will eventually decay. No, I’m going to establish the House of David, a dynasty—and it’s going to last forever!”
Now this prophecy was partly fulfilled when David’s son Solomon took over the throne and continued the Golden Age of Israel’s history—an age that would still be remembered with great fondness hundreds and hundreds of years later. But notice what God said. He said that this Son of David would rule forever. Solomon reigned a long time, but not forever.

The ultimate fulfillment of this promise lay in a baby who would be born about 1000 years later, in the very same town in which David was born: Bethlehem. The king wouldn’t be born to a queen, but to a young woman named Mary. The king wouldn’t be born in a palace, but in a stable. But that king was the eternal, almighty Son of God, whose throne endures forever, who is today ruling all things from his position at the right hand of God in Heaven.

After hearing this amazing promise, David said, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?” (1 Chronicles 17:16) He had been a humble shepherd boy, the youngest of eight sons. But God raised him from that lowly position and anointed him to be king of Israel. He had protected David from repeated attempts on his life by wicked King Saul. Finally God made David king. Truly David had been through “dangers, toils, and snares”, and he could do nothing but marvel in amazement at the grace that had done so much for a wretch like David.

You know what I’m talking about when I use the word “wretch” to describe David—the adultery with Bathsheba, the murder of her husband Uriah, the multiple wives, etc. David didn’t know these specifics yet, because he hadn’t committed those sins yet at this point in time. But David knew what was in him. He knew the sins he had already committed. He knew his sinful nature, his wretchedness, and he knew that he didn’t deserve to have been brought “this far” by God, and that not only did he deserve that God would have left him tending sheep but that God would have shown his amazing and righteous wrath over David’s sin.

But God had instead showed his amazing grace. How amazing was it? So amazing that God had sent his Son—his one and only Son—to live a perfect life in David’s place and to suffer and die in David’s place! Truly amazing!

And then God had additionally showed David with earthly blessings and promises. Therefore David went on, “And as if this were not enough in your sight, O God, you have spoken about the future of the house of your servant. You have looked on me as though I were the most exalted of men, O Lord God.” (1 Chronicles 17:17)

Clearly David is amazed at God’s grace.

2700 years after David, a man named John Newton was born. He was the son of a sea captain. When he was only 6 years old, his mother died, an event which apparently embittered the young boy against God. When he was 11 years old, he began going to sea with his father. At age 19, Newton was forced into service on a British man-of-war, but soon was transferred to a slave ship, where he was brutally beaten by the captain. Ultimately, he became the captain of a slave ship himself, traveling to Africa to pick up loads of human cargo, who were captured, chained like animals, and packed like sardines for the voyage to the Americas, where, if they survived the trip, they were destined for a life of cruelty and likely, an early death.

John Newton was not a nice man. He was a bitter, violent, detestable man who was hated not only by the slaves he transported, but even his own men couldn’t stand him. And spiritually—he was lost as lost could be, as blind as blind could be.
But something amazing happened to John Newton. After preserving him through a couple of near-death experiences at sea, God worked a change in Newton’s heart. Through the power of the gospel, God worked faith in him and in his forgiveness. God made him his own dear child.

Eventually, Newton gave up the life of a slave ship captain. He studied Hebrew and Greek, and ultimately was ordained in the Church of England and served the rest of his life as a pastor. At age 82, shortly before he died, John Newton said, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.” He wrote many hymns, including “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds.” But his most endearing and enduring hymn is most certainly the one that sums up his life: “Amazing Grace.”

“Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me.” God’s amazing grace was evident in the life of David, an adulterer and a murderer, but also, a forgiven child of God who served his Lord and became one of the human ancestors in the line of the Savior. God’s amazing grace was also evident in the life of John Newton, a miserable, inhumane slave trader, but also a forgiven child of God who served his Lord and proclaimed the gospel to millions through his enduring words.

What about you? How has God’s grace been evident in the life of a “wretch” like you? Maybe that word—“wretch”—seems a bit strong. After all, we haven’t committed adultery, like King David did. Yet the Bible says, “Anyone looks at a woman lustfully has committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:28) We haven’t ordered someone murdered, like David did. But the Bible says, “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer.” (1 John 3:15) We haven’t placed someone in shackles and sold them into slavery like John Newton did. But we have often—quite often—viewed others as a means to an end, as things to be used for our benefit.

Adulterers, murderers, slave traders—that’s us! Amazing, compassionate, full of grace—that’s our God! God’s amazing grace was not just for King David and John Newton. It’s for you. For Jesus died, not just for King David and John Newton; he died for you. Your sins are forgiven—every one of them. You are the dear child of your father in heaven. You are an heir to eternal life. You can be sure of it. Because it’s right there in his Word, you can sing, “The Lord has promised good to me; His Word my hope secures. He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.”

Really? Is it really secure? Yes, because God’s amazing grace does not change. Your soul has already come through “many dangers, toils, and snares”—and there are undoubtedly more to follow. But have no doubt about this. “‘Tis grace has brought you safe thus far, and grace will lead you home.”

“Amazing Grace”—an amazing hymn about an amazing God. Amen.