

“GRACE--GOD’S UNTAPPED POWER”

2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Proper 9-B, July 8, 2018

“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!”

Although many surveys have been taken in recent decades to prove conclusively that “Amazing Grace” is the best-known and the most-loved hymn in the United States these days, there are also a growing number of Americans, including some born-again believers, who are becoming more and more reluctant to use that DESIGNATION (of a “WRETCH”) as a form of identification they are willing to assign to themselves!

This was never the case, however, for John Newton, the British hymnwriter who first published this hymn in 1799! Born in 1725, he was only 7 years when his sainted mother, who was a very devout Christian died. His father was a seagoing captain on the high seas who had very little, if any use at all for all “Things Christian” or for the Church. He took his son John upon the high seas with him when he was only 11 years old.

When you stop and think about it “Amazing Grace” is the story of John Newton’s life!

For years, he became the captain of an English slave ship, routinely sailing from England to the western coast of Africa. There, he would then pick up African people; the majority of which had been sold to those in the slave industry by other black African chieftains; men and women, many of whom, who had been captured in tribal warfare; not unlike the kind of wars devoted to ethnic cleansing that are still be found around the world today!

Having first sailed from England to the western coast of Africa, John Newton then transported these men and women like human cargo across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. Sometimes, as many as 600 Africans were placed into one ship; where they were forced to lay down, in the hull of the ship, underneath the deck; side by side, where they were chained in place in rigid formation; primarily so that they could not attempt to take their own lives.

Oftentimes, 20% them, maybe 30% or more of them would die in their transport along the way!

Prior to his conversion to the Christian faith, John Newton was a hard-hearted man, without even the slightest INKLING of compassion towards these human beings who had been treated so inhumanely.

One day, however, one of those slave-ship that John Newton was commandeering, was caught in a horrendous, life-threatening storm, at sea. In his great fear, he cried out to God for mercy and he also gave his life to Christ and he became a Christian!

Every line of Newton’s hymn “Amazing Grace” is filled with tears of remorse because of despicable and contemptible life he came to realize he had lived up to this time before becoming a Christian. The hymn also, however, speaks powerfully of the amazing grace of God that brought directly to him, from the Heavenly Father’s throne, such an abundant pardon and mercy!

Friends, like John Newton, but 1700 years earlier, St. Paul was a man who had come to believe that he too was saved solely by the grace of God at work in his life!

He never ceased to marvel that God in his grace had chosen someone like him, of all people, to become the foremost missionary to the Gentiles in that first century world. Paul one day said, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.'

But for this very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life" (I Timothy 1:15-16, NIV)!

My brothers and sisters, the last four verses of our epistle lesson today are words that are written in a totally different tone and demeanor than are the first six verses!

Unfortunately, there were some false teachers who had found their way into the Corinthian congregation who prided themselves and deluded themselves into believing that they were in possession of some type of superior knowledge that they now had about Christ and the Christian faith that no one else was privy too; not even the Apostle Paul who was the founder of the Church at Corinth.

They were doing their best to discredit St. Paul's ministry, to whatever degree, they could!

They were saying such things as: "Paul was not a true APOSTLE of Jesus Christ, because he was not part of Jesus' first 12 disciples! They claimed that he had never SEEN Jesus, in his Risen, Gloried body, as the other apostles had, minus Judas Iscariot, however, whose position was replaced following Jesus' Ascension into heaven by a man named Matthias who has seen the gloried, risen Christ with his own eyes too (Acts 1:26).

But Paul reminded them that he had seen Christ in his risen, glorified body, when the Risen Savior appeared to Paul on the Road to Damascus, converting Paul to the very faith Paul had done his best to destroy and wipe out!

Paul earlier had written to his fellow disciples that were members of the Church in Corinth these magnificent words: "I am the very least of all the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace to me was not in vain! Indeed, I worked harder than all the rest of them, though it was not me it was the grace of God" (I Corinthians 15:9-10)!

Through the stewardship of God's own grace, Paul believed he had been called upon by God and empowered by God to become the foremost ambassador of the Gospel to the Gentile world (Ephesians 3:1-7)!

But this doesn't mean that St. Paul always had an easy time of it. While Paul recalls in the first six verses of our Epistle Lesson this morning some of the great spiritual revelations that the LORD GOD Almighty had given to him, even allowing him to be caught up one day, Paul says, into the "Third Heaven," whether in the body or out of the body, Paul couldn't say for sure: but he was caught up into heaven and was given an opportunity to look around; not unlike the opportunity that God also gave to the Apostle John on the LORD'S DAY, exiled on the Isle of Patmos, would one day be given the opportunity to look into heaven and write down the things he saw, at God's command, in what we know today as the last book of the Bible: THE REVELATION OF ST JOHN THE DIVINE.

Paul writes: "But to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh; a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I pleaded with the Lord this, that it should leave me" (Vv. 7-8)!

Exactly what St. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was we can't say for sure and perhaps it is good that Paul doesn't identify it for us exactly, so that all of us, who have things about our lives that we wish could be changed for us, but aren't changed, can relate to St Paul on a very personal level here!

Some people think that Paul's thorn in the flesh was the temptation of doubt, or even the temptation to shirk some of his responsibilities as an apostle, which was John Calvin's view.

Others, like Martin Luther, believed Paul was talking about all the various forms of persecution and OPEN hostility that always came his way--for after all--he goes on to say at the end of this reading: "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong!"

Perhaps St. Paul had in mind, temptations of the flesh that were sexual in nature.

Maybe it was some type of physical afflictions! Perhaps, migraine headaches?

Did Paul struggle with some sort of addiction? The Greek word that is translated as a "thorn" here should probably be more accurately translated as a "stake" that indicates some type of savage pain!

Some people believe that St. Paul, as a victim of Malaria may have had very poor vision and that his eyesight was largely limited. Is this why he writes at the end of his letter to the Galatians: "See with what large letters I am writing, as I am now writing to you with my own hand" (Galatians 6:11)?

Three times, Paul asked the Lord to take away this thorn in his flesh away from him, but three times, he received the answer "No!" In other words, "No, for my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness!"

Therefore, Paul continues, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10)!

You know there are so many different interpretations and applications that many mature Christians have given to these concluding words of St. Paul in our epistle lesson today--so many of which--seem to me at least to be equally valid!

But I only have time to share with you one such interpretation and application of this Biblical text this morning and the interpretation and the application of this Biblical text that I want to share with you this morning is this one that consists of only four words: **PROBLEMS CAN BE POSSIBILITIES.**

And yet, isn't the Bible itself, just loaded full of stories of how God's people, during their time here on earth confronted all sorts of various problems?

I know that when Pastor David Ludwig was here 3 weeks ago, how he made mention of the Patriarch Joseph, a very important figure in the Old Testament, who was the son of Jacob, who was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham!

Joseph certainly had a problem; his 10 older brothers didn't like him and that's putting it mildly; for various reasons we don't have time to go into. One day he was going about his own business, when his ten older brothers grabbed him and then threw him into

an empty well. And then they sold him into slavery to a bunch of camel drivers. **NOW THAT'S A PROBLEM!**

Joseph arrived in Egypt. Eventually, he went to work for a good man named Potiphar as the manager of Potiphar's household and estate.

Then one day, the boss left town for a few days on a business trip and while he was gone, his boss' wife attempted to seduce this handsome young man named Joseph. But Joseph resisted all her advances. In doing so, he asked himself: "How could I do this evil deed against my master and against my God?"

And yet, Potiphar's wife, become so scorned that she told her husband when he returned from his business trip that Joseph had made advances towards her, when nothing could have been further from the truth. **THAT WAS A BIG PROBLEM.**

For a time then he was, once again, thrown into prison! **BUT JOSEPH, BY THE GRACE OF GOD, NEVER STRAYED AWAY FROM GOD. HE LOVED GOD, PRAYED TO GOD, SEARCHED THE LORD'S WILL AND WHAT HAPPENED?** Through a most unusual turn of events, Joseph still ended up becoming Pharaoh's righthand assistant--a rich and powerful man!

When his brothers came to him for assistance years later, because there was a great famine in Israel, though they didn't recognize Joseph, Joseph recognized them. Because the grace of God was so sufficient in Joseph's life, he ended up forgiving his brothers and giving them the help, they sought from him. He said to them, through his own tears: "You meant what you did for evil, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20)!

MARY, THE MOTHER OF OUR BLESSED SAVIOR, SHE CERTAINLY HAD HER OWN SHARE OF PROBLEMS TOO, WASN'T SHE? Can you imagine having any bigger problem than for the one she had. She became pregnant and professed to her fiancée that the child she was carrying was no one less than the Son of the Most-High God who had been supernaturally conceived within her by the power of the Holy Spirit!

MARY CERTAINLY HAD A PROBLEM. BUT SHE REMAINS TO THIS DAY THE MOST REVERED MOTHER IN ALL THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD!

A short time ago I came across the story of a man named J. Christy Wilson, who ever according to When, we come to view the grace of God as his own, oftentimes, untapped power that he makes available to us in our lives, then for us, quite frankly: **PROBLEMS MAY BECOME POSSIBILITIES.**

LET ME TELL YOU NOW A TRUE STORY ABOUT A WELL-KNOWN CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY WHO LIVED FROM 1921 TO 1999 NAMED J. CHRISTY WILSON.

Billy Graham once said: "J. Christy Wilson will go down in history as one of the greatest and most courageous missionaries of the Gospel in the 20th Century, who pioneered Christian work, of all places, in Afghanistan. When others thought it impossible, he entered that country of 12 million Muslims and taught private English lessons to the crown prince of Afghanistan and founded a Christian mission, that according to an article I found that was published in 2017, remains fruitful to this day!

Afghanistan is still known for its wool industry; where lots of sheep are raised to produce lots of wool. But when this devoted Christian Missionary first arrived in Afghanistan, the sheep had picked up a disease that was carried by parasites who subsisted on some kind of troublesome snails that plagued the landscape. These snails

carried a sickness and the sickness was passed on to the sheep; the side effects of which caused the infected sheep to start losing their wool and eventually to die.

Somehow, J. Christy Wilson had heard that there was a type of duck in the states that feasted on these snails; ducks that could consume these snails and not die.

This Presbyterian Missionary, a Presbyterian Minister and a graduate from Princeton, wrote back to the home office of his Church denomination in the USA asking them to send to him some of those ducks.

While this was before the days of jet airliners and there was no way of transporting these ducks to Afghanistan bodily; Christy Wilson and his wife received a shipment of 12, hopefully, fertilized eggs. Of those 12 eggs, only two survived; one a male and the other a female.

Eventually the ducks mated so that they had baby ducks; that eventually mated, so that there was a constant growing number of baby ducks being hatched in Afghanistan: all put out on the landscape who started feasting on these troublesome snails until the snails were completely wiped out and the sheep started producing wool again!

In Philippians 4:19, St. Paul writes: "MY GOD SHALL SUPPLY ALL YOUR NEEDS ACCORDING TO HIS RICHES AND GLORY IN CHRIST JESUS!" Paul doesn't say: "My God shall supply some of your needs; no! But all your needs!"

Friends, as St. Paul and countless other Christians throughout the centuries have come to rely upon God's grace--still for so many people in this world--God's untapped power--may be find our confidence in his grace, by which he empowers us also to believe that PROBLEMS CAN BE PERSONALITIES!

May we each hear him say to every one of us again this Lord's Day: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in your weakness!" Amen