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## Summer Family Reunion

Part 2 – Truly Amazing Grace

Pastor Rene Schlaepfer

We are so stoked to be here. My wife, Laurie, and I love coming to Woodland Hills every single summer. It really is our family. The word *family* belongs in your church name because it just feels like one big family. There's always something new here. I have never been to Woodland Hills when you've had a choir on stage. How good did they sound this morning? It was amazing. I love your church and I really love your pastor. I think probably most of you understand this, but you are blessed as a church with somebody that I truly think is one of the most gifted communicators in America. And you have him as your pastor.

A quick family update. Here's my wife, Laurie, and our five grandkids now. This is Emmett, he's two, and Danny is four, and Freddy is six, and then we have two one year old granddaughters – Willa and Amelia. We also have some adult children, but really, who cares.

We live in Santa Cruz, California. And if you're not from California, I understand you probably imagine all Californians are long-haired, pot smoking, tie died t-shirt wearing surfers who wear flip flops to funerals, follow the Grateful Dead in VW Vans, vote communist, and live in redwood tree houses. That's actually not true for most of California, but I just described our pastoral staff, and that's not far wrong.

Somebody that was visiting Santa Cruz said, "Man, Santa Cruz makes Berkley look like a republican party convention." And that's true. So, Branson is a little different for us. We do not pass Ricki Bobbie's Pit Stop on the way to church, but we love it here, we really do.

When I prayed about what to share today, I thought, I really want to go back to the heart of our faith. Like if I had one message left to preach to y'all here at Woodland Hills Family Church, what would I preach, and it would be what I'm going to talk about today.

But let me get into this with a quiz. Are you ready for this? I'm going to show you some photographs of singers and I'm going to ask you what every single one of these singers or groups have in common, besides the fact, of course, that they are singers.

Here we go. Elvis, Aretha, Johnny Cash, Andrea Bocelli, Diana Ross, Whitney Houston, Ray Charles, Sarah McLachlan, Willie Nelson, Rod Stewart, The Lemon heads, Leann Rimes, Al Green, Destiny's Child, Judy Collins, Dolly Parton, U2, and The Haygoods. What do they all have in common?

They have all sung great renditions of Amazing Grace. The most popular song ever written in human history is on at least 11,000 different albums on Apple Music right now. That's pretty good for a song first written 251 years ago. You probably know some of the story behind this song, but I want to add some detail to the story today that you probably have never heard before, frankly because some of it might be a little PG13 rated to share in church.

So, here we go. It was written by probably the unlikeliest person to ever write a church hymn, John Newton. Now most people know that he was a sailor in the 1700s, but here is what you may not know. His song writing career, you could say, began when on board his first ship, and he wrote obscene songs about his captain, which the crew loved to loudly sing. This got him in trouble of course with the captain. The captain said Newton was the most profane sailor he had ever met. And if you know sailors, that is saying something. As the Captain put it, "Newton exceeded the limits of verbal debauchery. John Newton, most people know that he wrote Amazing Grace, but they do not know this background. He was an angry young man. He called himself a radical atheist. He made it a goal to de-convert as many believers as possible.

His anger and his personality also really made him, frankly, a jerk. Eventually he so annoyed his own crew that they kicked him off the ship in Sierra Leone, Africa at the age of 20, where Newton actually became a slave himself. He was sex-trafficked as a young man and all of the most horrible things that that implies, not for a month, not for six months, but for three years. You'd think that experience would cause him to empathize with people in slavery. Instead, it drew him far in the other direction, causing him to hate humanity.

When he finally escaped after three years, he became the captain of several slave ships and he said he was no longer capable of feeling empathy for any human being. In fact, he said, "Had my influence been equal to my wishes, I would have carried all the human race with me. In other words, he would have sold you into slavery if he could of.

And then in 1748, something happens that changes his life. He gets caught in a killer storm, hurricane level. He was aiming for Liverpool England as his port of call when the storm hit. After days of it, he's blown completely off course. He thinks he and his entire crew are just going to perish on the open sea. With both hands fastened on the wheel, he prays the first prayer he has ever prayed in his life. "Lord, have mercy on me." Remember, he is an atheist at this point, so this is a last-ditch effort.

Eleven hours later, the ships limps into Donegal Ireland. You'd think that he would be relieved and grateful and immediately become a follower of Jesus after that prayer. It's said he says he was very, very confused and this is what confused him, and it makes sense if you think about it. He said, "If there is really a God..." People would ask him, "Did the answer to prayer convince you that there was a God?" He answered, "No." they asked "Why?" he said, "Because if there is a God and if he's interested at all in justice, he would have let me die." If there is a God in heaven, he would never have saved somebody like me." So, it was very confusing. He picks up a Bible and instead of just mocking it, he starts to read what it actually says. And very slowly converts to Christianity. Eventually he becomes a pastor of his own church. And in 1772, he wrote this song book for his own congregation to sing. The hymn that he wrote for New Years Day, 1773, we now know as Amazing Grace. So, knowing his story, can you now

feel the emotion behind these words. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved wretch like me.” He was a wretch in every way. He was wounded and abused and manipulated and he wounded, abused, and manipulated other people. A wretch like me. “I once was lost” – lost spiritually and literally lost physically on the open ocean. “But now I’m found. I was so blind, but now I see.”

Well, today what we are going to do is look at the 10 verses in the Bible that inspired that song. I call this message *Truly Amazing Grace*. If you have your bibles or your Bible app, open them up to Ephesians 2: 1-10. If you are looking for a bump in your joy level today as a believer, if you're like, *my faith has gone stale somehow. I need my zip back*. Or maybe your new to all this and you're wondering what this Jesus thing is all about. I want to show you exactly what John Newton thought was so amazing, yet what many Christians just don't get. It's very simple for amazing truths.

First, I am saved from death.

Ephesians 2: 1-10 – ***As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.*** A lot to unpack in those verses but with the time we have, I just want to focus on the main point here, the words “were dead.” Say, “you were dead” out loud with me. I found that the people in my ministry who seem to understand this concept the best are people in recovery. Because this is the admission in the first of the 12 steps. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable, so there was no where to turn, but God. This verse is saying that is the truth for all of us just like a dead man literally cannot lift a finger to help himself. We were dead in our sins; we couldn't just snap out of this.

Now watch this. This is very important.

***3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.*** So, the key phrase here is all of us. Say that out loud with me. “All of us.” Paul is talking about the shared experience of our humanity. All of us do stuff we know we shouldn't do. All of us hurt people we love. All of us have times that we say or do things that seem to be the exact opposite of what we say we value. All of us. This means no one is better than anybody else. And no one is worse than anybody else. So, don't look down on anybody else. We are all alike. We are all sinners, all in need of God. I am saved from death in love. Say that out loud for me. “I am saved from death in love.”

***4 But because of his great love for us, God...*** In other words, God didn't do this grudgingly. God loves you so much and he loved John Newton so much. That's why God... Yes, God is a God of justice, but God is love and so because of his great love for us, God, ***who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions...*** This is important because the cure for death isn't kind of more rules.

Once I saw somebody who was saved from drowning. This was just last year. I was on the beach in Santa Cruz, and I saw a father and a son who were drowning in the waves. There are lifeguards on the beach and there is a harbor patrol boat right next door.

I've got to tell you something. They did not stand there on the beach and yell at the people who were drowning. "Hey, try harder! Swim faster! Swim like this! Here's a book on swimming, good luck, learn from it!" And when we were as good as dead, God didn't stand on the shore and throw us tablets with the ten commandments only. "Good luck! Hope they bring you back to life!" No, the law was there for a purpose, but what God did ultimately was dive into the waves and drag us all the way to shore. We were dead, but he made us alive in Christ.

Here's the problem. We religious people can come across like this to our culture – "Shape up. Stop being so dead." "You stupid dead people. here are some rules. You're not even trying to read them!" Dead people don't need regulation, dead people need resurrection. And this says when we were dead, God made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions.

This is what so amazed John Newton. I just love this. God did not save like a former slave captain who had changed his ways. He did not save a good guy. He saved a wretch. Before his prayer, "Lord have mercy," John Newton hadn't stopped doing any of his bad stuff. All he did was ask for mercy and he got it. This is what blew John Newton's mind about grace. This is why he was so amazed about grace that he was saved when he was a wretch. God made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions.

And of course, what this means is you don't need to clean up your act first. That's counterintuitive, isn't it. This could become a barrier between people and really finding God's transforming grace. Maybe somebody invited you to church this weekend or you're joining us online and you think to yourself, *But I've done things I'm ashamed of. I don't have a church background. I don't fit in. I'm not like the others. I don't know much about this. I don't understand it all. I'm not a good church person.* And Paul was like, yeah, exactly. No one deserves it. No one gets in because they are a good person. And you do fit in perfectly because guess what? All of us are the same. All of us are saved from death, in love, by grace. And here is where it really starts soaring. Paul just goes off on a riff here in the rest of Verse 5.

**...it is by grace you have been saved.** Grace is such an important theme in the Bible. Amazing Grace is in the title of the song as we know it, so I think it's pretty important that we define grace. What is grace? I've heard some very unbiblical definitions of it. In the original Greek language of the New Testament, the word *Charis* is the word for grace. It's the word that we get our word *charity* from. It originally meant favor, as in a gift with no strings attached. No strings whatsoever. Unearned, unmerited, undeserved. Somebody said in the Bible that grace is the free and benevolent gift of God. I have a question for you. Is that the picture that most people in the world have of what we are all about? Yeah, the main point of Christians these days is that we all need to be saved, but it's a gift with no strings attached, unmerited, undeserved, unearned and it a free and benevolent favor of a God who absolutely loves us. I don't think that's how our message often comes across. More on that in a second. Because Paul is on a roll here.

**6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.** What this means is for all eternity, we are going to shine as examples of God's amazing, transforming grace. Why? Here it is again. **8 For it is by grace you have been**

***saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.*** Paul makes the same point about four times in this one sentence. By grace, not yourselves, it's a gift, not by works, so no one can boast. Nobody can say, "Yeah, I was good enough." Nobody can say, "I never missed church, so God saved me." Nobody can say, "I chanted enough times." Nobody can say, "I was baptized so many times I was deemed worthy."

We do beach baptisms. I tell them, "You can be baptized on the beach until you know every single fish in the ocean by name, but that is not what saves you. It is 100% the gift of God. We don't do a thing. We couldn't we were dead.

I was at an open casket funeral the other day and the people said a lot of great things about the body in that casket. And you know what? He never blushed, he never blinked. Why not? He was dead. We couldn't save ourselves. So, God stepped in and saved us. Raise your hands if you are super glad that we don't get to heaven on our own works. Anybody happy about that? I have to tell you something though. Somehow, this radical message gets watered down and lost in all of the noise.

A survey in 2020 asked thousands of people, "Do you believe that a person qualifies for heaven by doing or being good?" Now, you'd probably expect that a lot of people in broader culture would say, "Yeah." That's kind of American fold religion. Listen to this. this is going to blow your mind.

Of those who identified as Christians, 52% agreed with that statement. The majority of Christians think the Bible teaches the exact opposite of the point Paul has made about a half a dozen times in this one section. That's a problem. You know why? Because if you believe heaven is a meritocracy, that people that go to heaven somehow deserve it, that's going to take you in one of two directions. Arrogance because you think you do deserve it and you look down on the other people who you feel like don't deserve it. And you get really judgey. "Those people" Or, despair because you don't think you deserve it, and you think you may never deserve it. And in my observation as a pastor, you might live your whole life in arrogance, but you will end up in despair if you don't understand what the gospel says about grace.

Two weeks ago, I was in a nursing home with an elderly woman on her death bed. She was raised in church, but she was very worried. "I hope I've been good enough. I haven't been perfect." I read her several verses from the Bible, including these very verses that we've been studying today. I said, "Edna, when you get worried, I want you to think of Jesus holding your hand just as I am right now. And he is speaking these words of assurance to you. It is by grace you have been saved through faith. And that's the gift of God, not of works. Her posture shifted and I held her hand until she fell peacefully asleep. The next day, her son told me that her whole demeanor had changed. She was relaxed and joyful. I'll tell you something. If only for that time in your life, which all of us are going to face at some point, right, it is really worth believing this. But this will also change every single moment of your life until that day.

One day, I met Robert Emmons. He's a researcher at UC Davis. His whole life project has been researching happiness. What makes human beings happy? So, it was a privilege to meet him face to face. I said, "Dr. Emmons, I know you've done a lot of academic research, but you've got to dumb it down for me. In one sentence, what's the difference between happy and unhappy people.

He said, "Unhappy people are entitled. *I deserve everything I have and in fact, I should have more and I'm mad that I don't have more.* Happy people are just grateful. They see the world as everything I have is such a gift. Everything around them is all about God's grace.'

You see, this is the effect of the gospel. Maybe you've never heard it put this way before but there couldn't be a clearer way to put it so how do I receive it?

Notice the phrase in this verse – through faith. That doesn't mean you have to drag up spiritual feeling and it doesn't mean that you have to have some kind of emotional experience. It doesn't mean you have to understand every single nuance of Christian theology. What faith means is you're putting your trust in someone. You're saying *knowing the character of Jesus I choose to put my trust in Jesus. With all of my wounds, all of my hurts, all of my doubts, all of my sins, I'm still putting my trust in Jesus that in love, by grace, he saved me from death. It's a free gift.*

Now, it can be really hard to receive a free gift. Once, my friend, Kelly, and I went to Disneyland. Somebody who works at Disney studios gave us a pass allowing four people to get into Disneyland for free. The only thing was they had to walk in together with us. So, we have two extra slots. It was just me and Kelly. We thought, Let's make somebody's day and right in front of these gates to Disneyland, we walked up to a couple and said, "Hang on. Before you buy your tickets, we have free tickets for you. All you have to do is walk through the turnstile with us and it's all free. What do you think they said? "Get lost! What kind of fools do you take us for?" And they went off and paid \$1000.00 or whatever it costs to get into Disneyland these days. So, we walk up to a woman, a little less confident this time. "Ma'am, would you care for a free ticket to Disneyland? And do you know what she said? I am not making this up. She said, "I don't want to listen to your timeshare sales pitch." We walked up to at least half a dozen different people. Every one of them said some version of "No thanks, you weirdos." And walked away.

We started wondering what was going on. Was it us. Finally, we walked up to a young family that didn't, based on outward appearances, appear to be very well off. They start to walk away, but then they stopped and said, "Well, okay." They were still not 100% sure so the parents pay for the two little kids, and they walked through the gate with us. Not until we were on the other side of the turnstile did the mom start crying and turn to us with tears in her eyes and say, "Thank you so much for this gift." We saw them later on in the day and she runs up and thanks us, apologizing. "I'm so sorry. At first, I thought you were a con man. I turned to my friend Kelly and said, "I'm fully expecting to hear that from a few people in heaven. "Rene, I thought you were a con man, but here we are." It is just so hard for people to believe that something super cool could be free. But the Bible says, here is the truth and I want you to say these things out loud with me. "I am saved from death, in love, by grace, for purpose."

**10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...** We're not saved by good works, but we are saved for good works. Now look at this great line – **which God prepared in advance for us to do.** Is that not mind-blowing? It's all a setup. That means it's no accident when your elderly neighbor calls you up and says, "I need a ride to the doctor." Prepared in advance for you. It's no accident when you think, I want to bring a meal over to that sick person down the street." It's no accident when Woodland Hills has a mission trip that requires somebody with your exact set of skills.

It's not accident when you kind of get that sense *I need to bake some cookies and bring them over to my friend for a chat*, especially if that friend is me; that's always the Lords will for you, but here's what I'm saying. I believe in divine appointments. God prepared those things in advance for you so be ready, eyes open. The point is grace is not ours to earn, but it is ours to give.

Now watch this. Here's where I want to zero in on that word *handiwork*. I think you're going to love this. I had not seen this before myself. I'd read this verse a million times, but until I started studying this a couple of weeks ago, I hadn't noticed this. The Greek word here for handiwork is Poiema, which is where we get our English word Poem. But in the original Greek, it's used not only for poetry; it's also used for paintings and gourmet meals and beautiful buildings. It just means a work of art by a real artist in a handcrafted work of art.

Now, check this out. I knew that, but here's the part that blew my mind that I did not know. Are you ready for this. This word is only used two times in the whole Bible. Let me show you the only other time it's used in the Bible. Romans 1: 20 – <sup>20</sup> ***For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what he made...*** So, that phrase "what he made" is actually one word in the Greek, the word Poiema. In other words, In the beginning, God wrote a poem in creation, telling us about himself. Mountains, what do they show about the nature of God? Majesty. Coral reefs, what do they show about God? The creativity of God. Stars? The power of God.

You probably felt it yourself at places like the Grand Canyon, but there is something about God that nature, in all of its majesty, cannot show. And that is his grace. And for that, there is you. You are like the Grand Canyon of grace. Not because of what you do, but what's been done to you, you show God's grace to a watching universe. You are the object of his creativity. God is the artist, and you are his artistic triumph because just like God did for John Newton, he takes all of your mistakes and tragedies and hurts and sins and weaves them into a masterpiece. Just like John Newton. You might know that he wrote a famous pamphlet arguing for the abolition of slavery in a way that only he could because he was both a slaver and a slave. Then he joined forces with William Wilberforce to abolish slavery in the United Kingdom. He became God's masterpiece. Somebody said, "Where people put a period, God puts a comma." We were dead in our sins, but God took all of our past and now uses for his glory.

I'm going to close with a video example. A woman named Tauna McGinnis, a friend of mine, is the executive director of the local pregnancy resource center there in Santa Cruz. You would expect her to be maybe some perfect, prim church lady. Very proper, right? Well, meet my friend Tauna.

Video Pays – Tauna McGinnis: I feel like my life is an example of Genesis 50: 21 where Joseph says that what the enemy meant for evil, God turns to good. My family on my mother's side, they were immigrants, and they became very wealthy, multimillionaires. So I grew up with money. But inside the family, there was a lot of tumult. When I was 13 in the summer before seventh and eighth grade, I was molested by my step father, which really catapulted and changed my world. I started trying prescription drugs I would find in different medicine cabinets of friends' houses. Running away, drinking, and having sexual activity. I would stay in abandoned homes. I became so hungry one time I tried dog biscuits. We stole a car, and I actually was convicted of Grand Theft Auto. I got sent to juvenile hall at one point.

I got sent to a shelter, and then got sent to the boarding school, which ended up being a cult. They actually did shut down three months to the day I went in. The person who headed it up got arrested by police and had kidnapped one of the kids from the school. Somehow, they decided a private mental institution in Reedley, California, which is near Fresno, was the solution. I did get released after a year in the mental institution. So I spent from the age of 15 to 16 there. I had a friend that I had met in class, and I didn't know if she was a believer. We would do things together, smoking and drinking, and stuff.

I called her one day from a payphone. I just said, "I'm really depressed, and I want to commit suicide." She said, "Don't smoke, don't drink, and come on over to my house." She told me the gospel and I actually opened up my heart and my life to Jesus Christ as my savior. So, I had met my boyfriend at the time. Two years after dating, when I was 19, we found out I was pregnant. I did find what is called a Crisis Pregnancy Center. They didn't offer judgment, but what she told me was there's MediCal that will cover your pregnancy, so that was just the difference. That was like a beacon of light.

We had our daughter three months later and have been together ever since. When we found out I was pregnant the second time, it was *okay, this is getting serious*. We got married when I was three months pregnant, so I decided to stop drinking, stop smoking cigarettes, stop smoking pot, and get cleaned up.

I started going to church. That's really where my life started changing so I, of course, had a thread in there for pregnancy centers because of what I had experienced with my first pregnancy. I started as a volunteer counselor once a week. I loved it so much I went to two times a week. I would never have the heart and the ministry that we are doing at the center without having been through all those horrible things and been looked at as a loser. We see these women in a moment of their life when they are low, maybe really low. There might not be anyone else there that would think well of her. Who does God see her as? God sees them for what their potential could be. So, we really want to love them unconditionally because if they even know one person cares and love them, then isn't that going to lead to the next step, which is believing that God can love them for who they are right in the middle of whatever it is, wherever they're at? From my unplanned pregnancy, we now have four children and 11 grandchildren. All because of what God did with that.

Rene: What a story of God's amazing grace. But don't miss this. God saw an abused, traumatized, drinking, pot smoking, hard partying, juvenile delinquent car thief who had been in a mental institution and a cult and said, "Perfect. You're going to be my masterpiece." And God says that of you. No matter what your past, God puts a comma where others put a period. Where people put a period, God puts a comma. There is hope for you. There is grace for you.

Now, I've given you a lot of information and you're like, "What does this all mean? Summarize it all in a sentence, Rene." John Newton, when he was elderly, he started losing his memory. He said, "On some days, there were only two things he could remember. They were that "I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great savior." In the end, that's really all you need to know.

I want to address two people today as we bow our heads in a word of prayer. The first group of people is this – maybe you grew up with all of this, but the wonder of God's grace to you got lost in all the noise somehow. Just in prayer say, "Lord, help me to be reactivated, resensitized to your grace all around me.



Second groups of people – maybe your new to all this. maybe you're not sure if you ever did simply receive the gift. I encourage you right now just receive the free gift of grace. Say “Thank you, Jesus. I believe I am saved from death, in love, by grace, for purpose, and I receive you into my life today as my Lord and Savior and I believe change has just begun in my life. Thank you, Lord.”  
In Jesus’ name... Amen.