

# Amazing Grace

May 1, 2022 A.M.  
West Side Church of Christ  
Searcy, Arkansas  
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## Scripture Reading

*“Who then can ever keep Christ’s love from us? When we have trouble or calamity, when we are hunted down or destroyed, is it because he doesn’t love us anymore? And if we are hungry or penniless or in danger or threatened with death, has God deserted us? No...despite all this, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ who loved us enough to die for us. For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can’t, and life can’t. The angels won’t, and all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God’s love away. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, or where we are—high above the sky, or in the deepest ocean—nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ when he died for us” (Rom 8:35-39 Living Bible [TLB]). [or NIV]*

On May 12, 2013, Maya Angelou appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show. The award-winning American poet sat opposite Oprah and began to describe a pivotal moment in her life which centers around the realization of God’s personal and unfathomable love.

A man named Frederick Wilkerson handed her a book and asked her to read aloud. Listen as Angelou tells the rest of the story:

*I read, “God loves me.” And he said, “read it again.” I said, “God loves me.” He said, “read it again, read it again.” And finally, I said, “God. Loves. Me.”*

There was a pause as a deep stirring of emotion overwhelmed her. Then, she continued:

*“It still humbles me, that this force, which made leaves and fleas and stars and rivers and you, loves me — me, Maya Angelou. It’s amazing! ... That’s why I am who I am. Yes. Because God loves me and I’m amazed at it and grateful for it.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBuEIEijpsc>

## INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, Jim McGuiggan began a sermon with words that still resonate with me. The exact phrasing is erased from my memory, but I love sharing these thoughts that were inspired by his. I imagine you have someone in your life who thinks you are pretty special. Maybe a little girl who worships the ground her mother walks on; or a little boy who thinks you must be the world’s greatest Dad. You might have a husband or wife who thinks you are the “bee’s knees.” But no one has ever loved you like God your father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. You may take a look in the mirror, and you may say “if you really knew me, you wouldn’t love me.” But God—who knows our hearts—knows you better than you know yourself, and he assures you, “I. Love. You.” We are tempted to think that if we don’t quite measure up, if we let him down, if we step in the wrong place or take a wrong turn, God will just give up on loving us. But in words as blazing as the sun, your rescuer says “I want you to know, from the get-go, nothing can separate you from my love for you. Not from without, or from within. No power of hell, no scheme of man—not even the treachery of your own devising—nothing can separate you from my love for you.

Words are not God’s only love language toward us. He confirmed it in blood when He sent his own son to Calvary. And who was it all for? Those who had their act together? Did he come to die for those who measured up? Not a chance. When we were hating God and hating one another, when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, when we were without hope and without God in the world, God SO loved the God-forsaking world that he gave His life for you and me. And if he could love you like that when you had nothing to offer him, what makes you think that now, in your struggling but penitent stumbling, with your less than perfect “yes” to God, he could love you less? He couldn’t love you more. Can’t you hear him crying out to you? Though it will cost the death of God’s own son — “nothing can separate you from My love for you.”

Isaac Watts wrote: “Was it for crimes that I have done, he groaned upon the tree? Amazing pity, grace unknown. And Love beyond degree.” Those words just go together like peas and carrots don’t they? Love...and grace.

And what difference does it make to believe in such love? What powerful doctrine results? A half century ago, Philip Yancey tells us, experts from around the world met in London to answer the question “what makes Christianity unique among all the world’s religions?” They went through all the great Christian doctrines—incarnation, resurrection—and all the rest. The debate went on for quite a while until C. S. Lewis walked into the room. “What’s all the fuss about?” he asked. “Oh, we’re trying to

figure out what makes Christianity unique among all the religions of the world.” “Oh that’s easy,” Lewis responded, “It’s grace.” Meeting adjourned.<sup>2</sup>

There is no end to religions which speak of humanity chasing after God, seeking to appease Him, hoping for good fortune; yet only the Bible (among the world’s religious books), and Luke 15 in particular, tells of a God who comes chasing after humanity, seeking out the wayward and lost, searching for us in the highways and hedges, pleading with us to accept his free gift of love. We call it “grace.” I once heard a preacher state, in reply to the question “what part did you play in your salvation?”, “I spent half my life running as hard and as far away from God as I could get; that was my part. But He chased me down at the cross. That was His part.” His love is limitless; and his grace is amazing.

### EVERYONE IS LOOKING FOR IT

It was that hymn, “Amazing Grace”, which Judy Collins sang *a cappella*, recording in a church building, which rose to #15 on the pop charts, 200 years after its composition. What’s so amazing about Grace? Simply put: Everyone is looking for it.

There is a rumored story that agnostic actor W. C. Fields was once caught in his dressing room reading the Bible. Embarrassed, Fields snapped the book shut and explained, “Just looking for loopholes.” Maybe so, but I suspect he was looking for grace.

If everyone is looking for it, and God has offered it, we would suppose that every person who’s ever darkened the door of a church building, or simply met a Christian, has heard it. Yet, strange though it may seem, 30 years ago at the Faulkner University Bible Lectures, Franklin Camp was asked if he was to do it all over again, what would he do differently. He replied, “I would preach more on grace.”<sup>3</sup>

Read the pages of church history. The most popular sermon of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was entitled “Sinners in the hands of an angry God.”<sup>4</sup> This sermon depicts God holding us by our ankles over the fires of hell, waiting for us to mess up, so that he could let us fall into the fire, and thus be vindicated in his Holy purity, too Holy to be in the presence of our sin. Here’s an actual quote: “The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace? (Zondervan, 2002), p.45.

<sup>3</sup> For the stories about Judy Collins and Franklin Camp, I am indebted to Eddie Levick in a sermon preached at the Twickenham Church of Christ in the late 90’s.

<sup>4</sup> Originally preached by Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan and a Calvinist Congregational minister, in his home parish of Northampton, MA. Yet it was his second presentation in Enfield, MA (now Enfield, CT) on July 8, 1741, that made the sermon famous. Text and audio (not original!) of the sermon may be accessed from his Wikipedia entry.

as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire...You are ten thousand times as abominable in his eyes as the most hateful, venomous serpent is in ours.”<sup>5</sup> For every one “white knuckle” conversion that took place, there were 2 who ended their life in suicide at the thought of facing such a God.

I know that on our best day, our righteousness is but filthy rags. But to every believer and non-believer who painted a portrait of my Lord from this description, who walks away from that quote thinking that my God finds nothing about you to love—that he thinks of you as grist for the mill, or some lump of coal—I wish to cry out: “that’s not my God!” The God whom Christ urges us to call “Father” is different altogether. Doesn’t the cross say that?

John 3:17 is eternally in our Bibles. Mark this down: “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it” (TLB). My God is in the saving business. Yes, God hates wickedness; but he LOVES wicked people. God detests our unrighteousness. But He “so loved” the unrighteous, that he offered his own son, not only for our sins, “but for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). Scripture doesn’t describe a God who holds us over the fire; it tells of one who holds out his arms to snatch us from the flames. Now, some may end up lost; but not one will end up lost because they were unloved by God. Jesus did not come into the world to send us to hell; He came to tell us we don’t have to go.

The gospel is good news, which means (1) it has to be good, and (2) it has to be news. And what good news it is. God loves you, and He is FOR you. He believes in you. And He finds value in you.

Here’s a bold statement: I believe everyone (and everything) wants to believe—longs to believe—there is something beautiful about them, there is something sincere and honest and valuable. And I believe only those who have been transformed by the message of God’s gracious love can see it.

For the Apostle Paul, this was a message He wanted every Christian to remember. In the book of Ephesians, Paul lists 43 “commands”—duties and responsibilities of the Christian.

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<sup>5</sup> Taken from Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards*, Vol 6 (1817; New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), p.458.

Now, Ephesians has 6 chapters. Take a close look at 2:11 where Paul commands his readers to “remember”—not a very difficult command is it? Note it well, because it’s the only command in the first 3 chapters of the book. When the inspired author wished to list 43 things we must do for God, he reserved 42 until after we hear what God, in Christ, has done for us.

### WHAT GRACIOUS LOVE DOES FOR US

And so Paul begins his magnificent book of Ephesians talking long and solely about God. When you and I were just a figment in the imagination of God, the story of grace was front and center. May I remind you of that amazing passage found in the first chapter of Ephesians, beginning in verse 3:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace (Ephesians 1:3-8 ESV).*

[Story of adoption. “I’m Blake, and I’m 8; I like to ride by bike and skate.” ... “We are Adam and Judy Dunn, and we’d like you to be our son.”]

To be loved by your parents is truly a wonderful feeling. But to be adopted—to be loved by those who simply chose to bring you into a loving family, without compulsion—is perhaps a love that knows no equal. For Paul, this illustrates what God did for us.

### WHAT GRACIOUS LOVE DOES TO US

But you may say, “God is truly wonderful. But talk about me for a change!” In chapter 2 Paul turns to you and me, and the portrait he paints is not pretty. By God’s infinite wisdom and love he chose to create us, and we lived in our arrogance. He chose to love us, and we spit in his face. He chose to save us, and we hid in the darkness. But the light of God is stronger than the forces of darkness. Will you read with me, from Ephesians chapter 2:

*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the*

*desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (2:1-9 ESV)*

Let's take an honest look at ourselves: what are we worth? We know our own list of sins and embarrassing facts. But I have good news! Even when we had nothing to offer him, by His great love he reached down and pulled us up and seated us with Christ in the heavenly places! And the gracious love of God changes us!

### 1. It Changes Our Value

For one thing, the God's gracious love changes our value.

*It was battered and scarred, and the auctioneer thought it scarcely worth his while  
To waste much time on the old violin, but held it up with a smile;  
“What am I bid for this old violin? Who'll start the bidding for me?  
“A dollar, a dollar.” “Who'll make it two?” “Two dollars. Who'll make it three?”  
“Three dollars once, three dollars twice, going for three...” But no,  
From the back of the room, a gray-haired man came forward and took up the bow;  
Then wiping the dust from the old violin, and tightening up all the strings,  
He played a melody pure and sweet—as sweet as the angels sing.*

*The music ceased, and the auctioneer, with a voice that was quiet and low, said:  
“What am I bid for the old violin?” And he held it up with the bow.  
“A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two? Two thousand! And who'll make it three? Three  
thousand once, three thousand twice, going and gone!” said he.  
The people cheered, but some of them cried, “I just don't quite understand.  
“What changed its worth?” Then came the reply, “The touch of the masters hand.”  
-- Myra 'Brooks' Welch*

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us,” writes John, “that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1 NIV). What a remarkable, incomparable story. A grace that is unmerited, undeserved, unachieved, and unattached to my ability to perform. “For a good man some would die” (said Paul)...but God showed his love toward us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” And

we are now “justified freely by his grace”! We now have boldness to come before the throne of grace as the very children of God. Is there any greater value?

## 2. It Changes Our Perspective

Second, God’s gracious love changes our perspective. God told the Israelites on no less than 3 separate occasions on the journey to Sinai that “I did not choose you because of your looks, your strength, your ability to perform, or even your righteousness. In fact, you are a stiff-necked and stubborn people! I chose you...because I love you.” (Deut 7-9). This is why Paul says “we are saved by grace through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift from God--as if anyone can boast about it!” (Eph 2:8-9)

Jeff Walling tells the story of once overhearing a lady tell the song leader, “You know that song that begins with the words ‘years I spent in vanity and pride?’ Well, I can’t sing that song, because, you see, I didn’t spend years in vanity and pride.” Jeff says he wanted to ask her, “How about right now?” Twice in the New Testament, the Bible writers quote Proverbs 3:34: “Surely he scorneth the scorners: but he giveth grace unto the lowly.” C. S. Lewis advised, if anyone would like to acquire humility, here is the first step is to realize that you are proud.”

And we all are. We are all tainted, we are all stained. If you feel fallen, you are not alone. I’m there too. So is everyone in this room this morning. The church is not a museum for saints, it is a hospital for sinners. But it’s our job and incredible opportunity to look past that, and see the beauty of Christ in each other, and the beauty of God in every being he has created. Every life is worthy of grace, because Jesus took your place.

## WHAT GRACIOUS LOVE DOES THROUGH US

Paul is not finished talking about God’s gracious love until he highlights what it can do for others through us. He tells us in chapter 2, verse 10, that, though our salvation is by grace—not by works—he saved us so that we would be used as vehicles of grace for others. He says it again in Ephesians 4:29:

*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear (NRSV).*

You may have thought long and hard throughout your life about God’s ability to grant grace, but have you pondered in this moment to consider whether you need it? Or if you would like to have it?

I can think of a number of scenarios in our lives when we could have used such a message of grace. Mark was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade when he was asked to lead the pledge of allegiance before the whole grammar school. He was terrified and excited all in one. His family had a small mirror in the bathroom, and Mark practiced all week before that mirror. “I pledge allegiance to the flag, of the United States of America.”

Friday came. Mark is standing behind the curtain as he hears his little classmates bumping into chairs as they fill the auditorium. He is so focused on doing right and performing well and he is saying over and over to himself “I pledge, I pledge, I pledge.”

It was time to lead the pledge. He walked out there and put his hand over his heart. And with nervousness, he began boldly, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” I mean, he was saying the Lord’s prayer— and that wasn’t all, they were saying it with him! He ran behind the curtain and huddled in the corner with wet pants. A life-changing moment in his life was hanging on the brink between humiliation and despair.

His 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher came over. She looked at him, put her hand on his shoulder and said, “Mark, you are undoubtedly the most creative little boy I have ever met. No one has ever thought to lead the Lord’s prayer, which is so much more important than the pledge of allegiance!” She reframed his mistake. Oh, I wish I could do that for you...and wish you could do that for others. How often do we yearn for someone to see value in us when we don’t perform well.

Jesus does.<sup>6</sup>

You see, it’s hard to believe, but even churchfolk tend to believe the lie that our world is pumping into our ears every day. If you want to be accepted, if you want to be loved, try harder to perform better. Make yourself more beautiful; maybe she’s born with it; maybe it’s Maybelline. Make yourself more beautiful, then they’ll love you.

Make yourself taller, with insoles for your shoes or heels for your feet. Make yourself thinner, maybe even anemic, then you’ll win their hearts. Make yourself look younger, with the hair dyes and the sneakers, and the sports car and the exercise room. If you make yourself look younger, then you will be accepted. Make yourself smarter by reading more books—then people will listen to you, and when they listen to you, then you can feel important.

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<sup>6</sup> This touching, personal story was told by Mark Crowell, psychology professor at Freed Hardeman University in Henderson, Tennessee, during an FHU lectureship in the late 90’s or early 2000’s.



Younger, thinner, taller, prettier, smarter, tougher, calmer, richer – take your pick. The Grace of God in the face of Christ tells us—that’s not needed. My grace is sufficient. I chose you...because I love you.

Your importance is rooted in the love of God. Your identity is found in the grace of God. And your security is found in the arms of God.

### CONCLUSION

What’s so amazing about God’s gracious love? When you know you need it, it doesn’t matter who you are, where you’re from, what you’ve done or where you’ve been, there is nowhere better to be than in the arms of God.