

What's the Message – Easter 2009

Today we bring you a special Easter message of how God brings our lives out of darkness.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. We pray today that just as Jesus broke from the darkness of the tomb to bring God's eternal light to the world, He would bring this light into your life as well. Amen.

Teacher, since this is the week before Easter, and our Pastor, Dr. Braun, has as his theme "out of the darkness," I was wondering if you had a special message for us that might relate to this theme?

As a matter of fact I do, Dale. And it is a true story about a man of the 18th century whose life – at least the first half of it – was spent in the depths of deep darkness. But let's set the scene by reading this part of our story just as our man often told it to others during his lifetime. And here, presented in the first person format – as if he were speaking to us directly – is what we know about this man's life:

The only godly influence in my life – as far back as I can remember – was my mother, whom I had the joy of her love for only seven years. When she left my life through death, I was virtually an orphan. My father remarried; then sent me to a strict military school, where the severity of discipline almost broke my back. Soon, I reached the point where I couldn't stand it any longer, and I ran away in rebellion at the age of ten.

One year later, deciding that I would never enter formal education again, I became a seaman apprentice, hoping somehow, to step into my father's trade and learn at least the ability to skillfully navigate a ship. By and by, through a process of time, I slowly gave myself over to the Devil. I determined that I would sin to my fullest ability, without restraint, now that the righteous lamp of my life – my mother – had gone out.

I did that until my days in the military service, where again discipline worked hard against me, and I further rebelled. My spirit would not break and I became increasingly more and more a rebel. Because of a number of things that I disagreed with in the military, I finally deserted, only to be captured like a common criminal and beaten publicly several times.

After enduring the punishment, I again fled. I entertained thoughts of suicide on my way to Africa, deciding that would be the place I could get farthest from anyone that knew me. And again, made a pact with the Devil to live for him.

Somehow, through a series of events, I got in touch with a Portuguese slave trader and I lived in his home. He was married to a black woman who was brimming with hostility and took a lot of it out on me. She beat me and I ate like a dog on the floor of the home. If I refused to do that, she would whip me with a lash.

I fled penniless, owning only the clothes on my back, to the shoreline of Africa where I built a fire, hoping to attract a ship that was passing by. It worked. The skipper of the ship that landed near to me thought that I had gold or silver or slaves of ivory to sell, and was surprised that I was a skilled navigator.

And it was there on that ship that I lived for a long period of time. It was a slave ship. It was not uncommon for as many as six hundred captives from Africa to be in the hold of the ship, down below, being taken to America. I went through all sorts of narrow escapes with death only a hairbreadth away on a number of occasions. One time, I opened some crates of rum and got everybody on the crew drunk.

The skipper, incensed with my actions, beat me, threw me down below and I lived on stale bread and sour vegetables with the slaves for an unendurable amount of time. He brought me up to beat me again, and I fell overboard. Because I couldn't swim, he harpooned me to get me back on ship. And I lived with the scar in my side, big enough for me to put my fist into, for the rest of my life.

On board, I was inflamed with fever. I was enraged with the humiliation. A storm broke out and I woke up again in the hold of the ship, down among the pumps. To keep the ship afloat, I worked along as a servant of the slaves. There, bruised and confused . . . bleeding . . . diseased, I was the epitome of the degenerate man.

I remembered the words of my mother. I cried out to God, the only way I knew, calling upon His grace and His mercy to deliver me, and for the sake of His Son to save me. The only glimmer of light that I could find was in a crack in the deck above me, and I looked up to it and screamed for help.

I think everyone would agree, this man had reached the bottom, hopeless in darkest despair. Now he no longer was a rebel. Now he realized he was not in control of his life and needed help. And he remembered one important thing that his mother had taught him, and he cried out to God to help him. And God heard him, and changed his life, and led him out of the darkness of sin. The rest of his life was the very opposite. He entered the ministry and began telling others his life story of sin and God's mercy and forgiveness. He was now out of the darkness and into God's light, and just had to tell everyone about this amazing gift from God. Now, Dale, please tell us about the last part of this man's life story in his own words.

In every place that I served, rooms had to be added to the building to handle the crowds that came to hear the Gospel that was presented, and the story of God's grace in my life. The tombstone above my head reads: "Born 1725, died 1807. A clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, preserved . . . restored . . . pardoned . . . and appointed to preach the faith he once long labored to destroy." I decided before my death to put my life's story into verse. And that verse has become a hymn.

On this Easter we celebrate the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, the Christ. You have just heard the story of a man who was restored as a child of God because of that resurrection. Who was this man? His name is John Newton. And the hymn is one of the best known and loved of all time.

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.

"Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come, 'tis
grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail, and mortal life shall cease,
amazing grace shall then prevail in heaven's joy and peace.

On behalf of the entire staff of Lamb of God Lutheran Church, I wish
you and yours a blessed Easter.