

# *The Great Love of the Lord*

## **Psalm 107**

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After a wonderful celebration of God's goodness in verse one, Psalm 107 makes a call for the people of God to tell their story. "Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story." Redeemed means to be bought back at a great price, and somehow, in some way, the psalmist is convinced God's people have a powerful story of how they have been redeemed. God is doing what God always does, gathering his people from far and distant lands, from scenes of darkness and despair, from places filled with fear and failure, from troubles of their own making as they turned from God, from slavery and oppression at the hands of cruel rulers, in one way or another God has gathered his people from east and west and north and south, and now it is time for the redeemed of the Lord to tell their story.

During the terrible days when England was involved in the practice of slave-trading, a young man was on a ship. The ship was struck in a storm. He happened to be reading a book about Christ and realized his life was on the wrong track. He made a commitment to Jesus Christ, and although he admits it took him a long time to change his ways, he eventually became a strong opponent of slave trade. He also found that salvation was not something he could keep to himself. He was redeemed by the Lord, and so he told his story. He told his story in the form of a hymn. His name was John Newton and he wrote the hymn, "Amazing Grace."

Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story. For John Newton, part of his story is told every time we sing: 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.

In Psalm 107 the redeemed of the Lord tell their story.

- Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from our distress.
- Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains, for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High. So he subjected them to bitter labor; they stumbled, and there was no one to help. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.

- Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.
- Some went out on the seas and the waves rose and the storms blew and they reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord, and he brought them out of their distress.

We were in the desert...we languished in darkness... in our pride we became fools and turned away from God...we set sail and thought we could master the seas, but the ocean engulfed us and we nearly drowned. Each of these scenarios probably recounts a specific experience of the redeemed. At the same time, each of these is evocative of countless other situations humans might experience. The desert...the darkness...the trouble we encounter when our pride gets in the way...the unpredictability of life, how we can be sailing on smooth waters one moment and then be swept away with trials and tribulations the next...each one of those might be a literal experience...each one can be a figurative image of our journey of faith.

I saw a clip on the internet about some churches that put together a program called Cardboard Testimonies. To let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story, they gave them all a piece of cardboard and a big marker. And they asked them to tell their story as simply as they could. Something like, "I once was lost, but now I'm found." Something like, "I was blind, but now I see." It was amazing to see how folks could give such wonderful testimonies in literally a sentence or two.

- Addicted to meth...addicted to his love
- Abused...set free
- Desperately sought approval...found all I need in him
- Christian men seemed weak...now I am one!
- Fighting cancer...by his stripes I am healed
- Lived in fear of cancer...now I am a survivor trusting in him
- Brain surgery 15 times...trusting him always
- Abused, raped, suicidal... healed, cherished, princess
- Pregnant, alone, homeless, broken...a family made whole in Christ
- Special needs child...told he would die at two. Hope, strength, and peace...pointing to the child...He'll be three next month
- Sideline Christian...now I'm going to be a missionary
- No kids of our own...and then pointing to the youth and children of the church ...all these kids are ours

Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story. The psalm tells of darkness and deserts and pride and foolishness and getting overwhelmed by the crashing waves of life. When the redeemed of the Lord tell their story, by writing a hymn or flipping a piece of cardboard, the good news of God's power to heal and make whole is proclaimed.

My friend Dr. Philip Johnson and his wife were visiting us this past week. I have been in numerous settings where Phil shares his testimony. He told his story at the church where he grew up:

*What do you believe? That was the unexpected question I was asked 20 years ago after a clinic visit by John, a graduate student at Stephen F. Austin who was seeing me with Hemophilia and AIDS. His question referred to my spiritual condition, not my impression about his failing medical condition.*

*I fumbled my answer. "I believe in God and grew up in the Presbyterian Church." That was my response. I wasn't prepared for that question. But, the next question John asked was even more convicting, "Would you pray for me?"*

*I grew up in this church. Some of you were my Sunday School teachers. But the truth is I left church from the time I was 17 until I was in my late thirties. I came back to get married, baptize my kids, and for almost every Christmas and Easter. I was a busy physician. I believed in God, but if what James says is true, that faith without works is dead, then the opposite was true for me, works without faith was also dead. I depended on myself. I felt like prayer was presumptuous. God provided and knew what I needed. But caring for patients with AIDS in those early days, in those days before we had effective therapy, was demoralizing. My patients all died. In the mid- 90s, I averaged a three patients dying each month. That's why John's questions were so convicting.*

*I realized I didn't know what I believed. So I began reading the Bible, a chapter a day, starting with Luke, a physician's account. I started praying again and saw answers to prayer.*

*John and I met for lunch after his clinic visits. He was amazing. When he found out he had AIDS at age 15, he quit believing in God. His mother's prayers and Bible verses she sent him finally convinced him to believe in Christ as the way, the truth, and the life.*

*In April, 1999, John called me. He was critically ill. We prayed. I admitted him to the hospital. Several days later I was called in the middle of the night because he was being transferred to the ICU. I felt I had let him down. That morning I got up and forced myself to read the next chapter in the Bible – the*

*first chapter of Revelation. It is the revelation of John about the return of Christ. John's name is mentioned 3 times in that chapter. If I didn't get the message, my devotion that day started with reading the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. As I prayed I knew that although John was walking through the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord was with him.*

*I went to the hospital. I saw John and his family . He improved and then later that week John died. He told me about seeing a glimpse of heaven before his death.*

*Thinking back, what is amazing to me was how a patient could heal a physician. What a wonderful question John asked me, "What do I believe?" His request for a prayer met me exactly where I needed help, accepting the opportunity we all have to communicate with God daily.*

*Reading the Bible and prayer has given me an answer when anyone asks the reason for the hope that I have. God is in control. The amazing love that God has for all of us is embodied in Jesus, who lived in the world and died for sins that keep us separated from a perfect God. We can't earn our way to salvation. Christ paid the price for us. It is up to us to accept the gift that is given. This is the Hope that we have. So, I ask you, "What do you believe?"*

My friend Phil ends his testimony by challenging us to think about our testimony. What do we believe? What have we experienced? When the redeemed of the Lord tell their story, what story do you tell? There is no right or wrong answer and there is no right or wrong story. Have you always known the love of God, from the earliest days of your childhood through all the ups and downs of life? That is a wonderful story. Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story of God's faithfulness to all generations. Has your journey taken you to other places, distant places, dark places, the desert, the rough and tumbling seas? That is a wonderful story. John Newton, the former slave trader said, "I once was lost but now I am found."

If you had a piece of cardboard and a big old marker, what would you write? What do you believe? What is your testimony? When the redeemed of the Lord tell their story, what story do you tell?

Reading Psalm 107 I found myself envisioning a preaching contest. Four preachers each get a chance to tell their story.

The first one says, "I wandered in the desert...I couldn't find a city to call my home...I was hungry and thirsty and my life ebbed away. Then I cried out to the Lord, and he delivered me. I give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love."

One by one they tell their story, each of the preachers. After the desert there is a testimony about the darkness, the gloom, like being in prison and bound by chains. The darkness and desert stories are followed by one of foolish rebellion, drifting far from God through reckless and sinful choices. The final preacher tells about riding high on the waves of life, making progress and reaping profits...but then the waters got to be too deep and I almost drowned. Each testimony is followed by the words, "I cried out to the Lord and he saved me from my distress." Each and every one says, "Let us give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love." What a preach off. What a preaching contest. It just gets better and better as the redeemed of the Lord tell their story.

I once heard a man named Tony Campolo tell about an actual preaching contest. He told about a time he was invited to preach in his home church. Tony is from Philadelphia, and he is Italian through and through. But he belongs to a black Baptist church in Philadelphia.

He said this invitation he received was to be part of a preaching contest. A whole bunch of folks would preach, and see who was best. He said this jokingly, but you had the feeling there was some serious preaching going on. Tony said he preached that day one of his best sermons. He told us how in his black Baptist church that when you're preaching good the people ask for more, they talk to you, they encourage you. They were encouraging him, and he was bringing the word. Tony said he didn't want to brag, but he was so good he was taking notes on himself.

He finished his sermon and sat down next to his pastor. Tony smiled with confidence and looked at his pastor. "Can you top that?" His pastor said, "That was good son. That was real good." And then his pastor got up. As Tony tells it, his pastor preached just a five word sermon. He said those five words over and over again. And when it was over, Tony knew he had been outpreached.

That old pastor stood up and said, "It's Friday...but Sunday's comin'! It's Friday, and Jesus is hanging on the cross. But Sunday's comin'. It's Friday, and Satan is dancing with joy, saying 'He saved others but himself he cannot save.' It's Friday...But Sunday's comin'. It's Friday, and it's dark, and there is despair, and the disciples are running scared and hiding in fear. It's Friday...but Sunday's comin'!" It's Friday and Jesus is all alone in the desert, tempted and tested and suffering and dying. It's Friday...But Sunday's comin'. And so it went for an hour. People were moved, and they were moving. Tony says that at the end of the sermon the old pastor reached down deep in his belly and growled out, "It's Friday....." and the people shouted back, "But Sunday's comin'!"

And then you realize it is not a preaching contest after all. It's not about us who tell the story. We are just the redeemed. We are just the ones whose lives have been bought back at a great price. There is no contest involved. All we are doing is pointing to Jesus, pointing to Jesus, bowing down to Jesus. It is all about him.

He is the one who entered the darkness, who walked in the desert, who searched for us, who sought us out, who forgave us, who touched us, who healed us, who welcomed us, who dried our tears, who calmed our fears, who gave us hope, and who carried us home.

Jesus took the Friday of our lives, the day of death and disappointment, and he brought a new day. Jesus Christ brought Sunday, the day of resurrection and new life and hope and peace and joy. Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story. We once were lost. Now we are found, because it's Friday...It's Friday...but Sunday's comin'. Amen