



# AMAZING GRACE

## Facts behind the film

The movie *Amazing Grace* tells the true story of William Wilberforce, who was first elected to the British House of Commons in 1780 at the tender age of 21



When he became a Christian a few years later, his first thought was to resign from parliament and become an Anglican minister. But he sought advice from a number of Christians, including former slaver-turned-pastor John Newton whom he had known as a child. Newton and others told Wilberforce that he should stay in parliament, where he could accomplish great things for God.

William - called "Wilber" by his friends - was not physically attractive, unlike the actor who portrays him in the film. Wilber (like the apostle Paul) was small in stature, with poor eyesight. Wilber also had a crooked spine, a long nose, and suffered chronic pain from ulcerative colitis which doctors treated with laudanum, a form of opium to which he became addicted.

But he could sing; he had a great sense of humour; and he was a great orator. 18<sup>th</sup> century writer James Boswell said of Wilberforce that he was a "shrimp" - but when he began to speak, "the shrimp grew and grew and became a whale".

Wilber was born in Hull, Yorkshire, and his father died when he was nine. Wilber spent the next year in London, living with his uncle and aunt who had become committed Christians under the preaching of George Whitefield, friend of John Wesley. Wilber loved his uncle and aunt - and the preacher John Newton, who wrote the great hymn *Amazing Grace* a few years later.

But Wilber's mother became alarmed by his enthusiastic letters home. Fearing her son would be caught up in the Wesley revival, she promptly brought him back to Hull. He was enrolled in a local college and before long he forgot about biblical Christianity. Wilber then studied at Cambridge where he befriended the young William Pitt ("Billy") who was later to become Britain's youngest Prime Minister. Wilber's university and early parliamentary days were filled with pleasure-seeking, including drinking and gambling.

But hedonism did not satisfy. On a tour of Europe with a former university tutor, Wilber began to study the Bible and to pray - and later dedicated his life to serve his Lord, Jesus Christ. His closest Christian friend was Henry Thornton - a rich banker and fellow MP who lived in a large house near Clapham Common, about 7 km south of London. Wilber, along with Henry and Marianne Thornton and other influential Christians, lived near and worshipped at Holy Trinity church on Clapham Common under the ministry of Bible preacher Rev John Venn.

Their critics dubbed them "the Saints" or "the Clapham Sect". They visited and dined with each other, prayed, read the Bible together, advised and encouraged one another. They were wealthy, but lived modestly. Before he was married, Henry Thornton gave away 85% of his income - he and the other "Saints" used their money to spread the gospel and help those in need. Their "home fellowship group" changed the course of history.

Over the years Wilberforce and his friends not only helped to abolish slavery, but also to:

- found the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (now the RSPCA);
- found the Church Missionary Society, which still trains and sends out Christian missionaries overseas;
- found the British and Foreign Bible Society (now called the Bible Society) which publishes and distributes copies of the Bible in 130 languages throughout the world;
- set up schools to teach poor English children, enabling them to read the Bible and later gain worthwhile employment (there was no state education as there is now);
- improve conditions in factories and prisons;
- found a Society for the Reformation of Manners and a Society for the Suppression of Vice ("manners" in those days meant "morality") - which aimed to stem the flood of pornography, alcohol and gambling addictions which were causing so much 18<sup>th</sup> century misery;
- recommend the appointment of Christian public servants to British colonies (including Australia and New Zealand) who encouraged just and compassionate policies towards convicts and indigenous people.

In 1797 Wilberforce published a book - *A Practical View of Christianity* - which became a best seller. It greatly impressed the statesman Edmund Burke, and is said to have contributed, along with the Wesley revival, to the dramatic uplift in British faith and values between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## The film

The 2007 film *Amazing Grace*, released on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade, follows history remarkably closely. The opening scene shows Wilber and his friend Henry Thornton on their way to Bath. Wilber, despite being ill, halts the coach and goes out into the rain to persuade a man to stop beating his horse.

In Bath, Henry and Marianne Thornton arrange a "chance meeting" with the beautiful young Barbara Spooner - who, like Wilber, resents the set up. It is good drama, but in reality Barbara was very keen to meet Wilberforce and he promptly fell in love with her. The film correctly shows their marriage in Bath after a whirlwind courtship and the improvement in Wilberforce's health under Barbara's care. He loves being a father, and they eventually have six children.

The film depicts the enormous parliamentary opposition to Wilberforce's bill to abolish slavery - and his despair when it was rejected year after year. In the beginning he had only a handful of supporters, but they included Charles Fox - a powerful ally who led the Whigs, the party in Opposition at the time. On one occasion Wilberforce persuaded a bare majority of MPs to pass the bill, only to find four members missing from the vote because they had been given free tickets to see a new comic opera. Finally - in early 1807 (200 years ago) - the bill passed with a huge majority. It is a great, true story!

## Questions for group discussion

1. John Newton is famous as the author of the hymn which begins: *Amazing grace - how sweet the sound which saved a wretch like me; I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see*. Why does he call himself a "wretch" - and why do you think this hymn has resonated with so many people over the last 200 years? See Romans 7: 24; 1 Timothy 1: 13-16; 1 Cor 15: 9-10.
2. Why did William Wilberforce want to resign from parliament after he decided to follow Jesus? How did he decide what to do? Why did John Newton - who had become a clergyman after his conversion - not advise Wilberforce to do as he had done? Are there any guidelines in the Bible about how we should go about making important decisions? Consider Psalm 37: 23; Proverbs 3: 5,6; Jeremiah 29:11; James 1:5; James 3: 1; Esther 4: 14b.
3. William Wilberforce suffered chronic ulcerative colitis and eye disease, despite prayer for healing. Does this mean he lacked faith? How did the apostle Paul deal with the same type of problem? See Galatians 4:15; Galatians 6: 11; 2 Corinthians 12:8,9.
4. Henry Thornton commends marriage to his friend Wilber. Do the following Bible passages suggest why he may have done so? Genesis 2:18; Genesis 2:24; Proverbs 18:22; Proverbs 31: 10-12; Mark 10: 6-8.
5. William Wilberforce could not have succeeded without guidance and help from Christian friends. Consider the following passages: Matthew 18: 19-20; Hebrews 10:25; Proverbs 15: 22; Proverbs 24: 6.
6. William Wilberforce founded a society to reform British morality, which he believed to be as important as his campaign to abolish slavery. Do you see a need for such a society today? Consider Matthew 5: 13-16; Ephesians 5: 11; Luke 17: 1-3; Proverbs 24: 11; Proverbs 31: 8.