

## Psalm 51

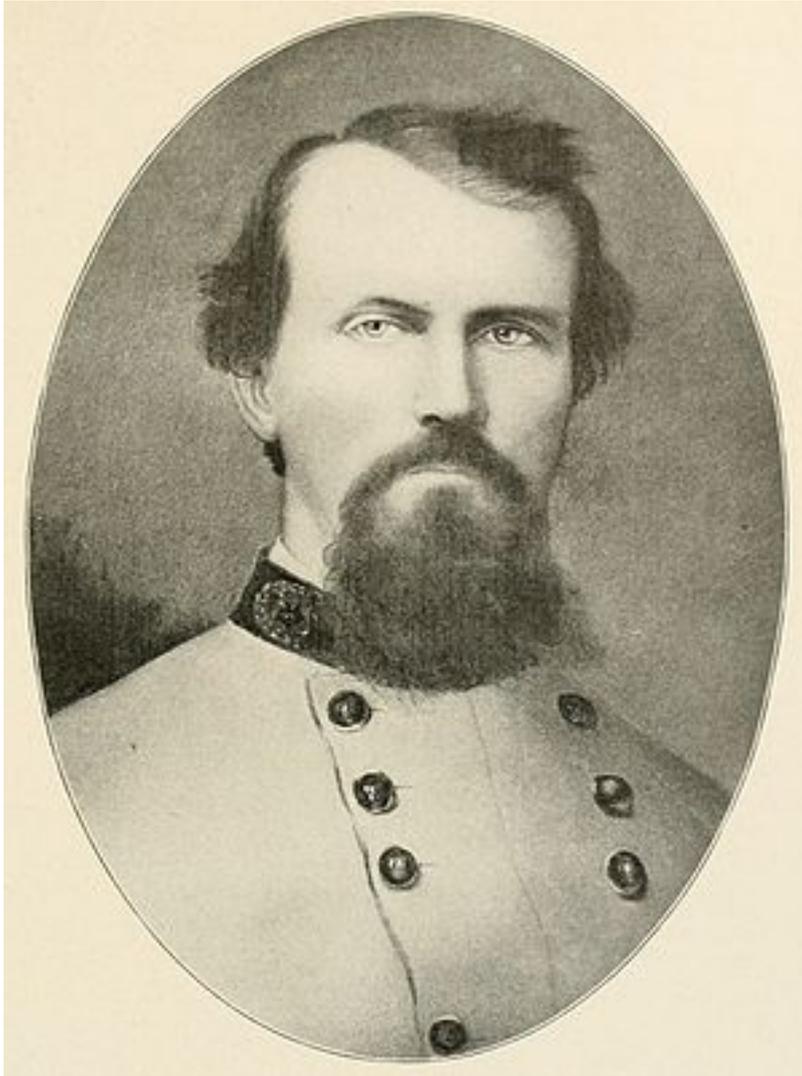
**David, Nathan Bedford Forrest, and John Newton**

“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”. We all know those lyrics of that great song that expresses our amazement and appreciation of God’s grace poured out upon our lives, but have you ever stopped to meditate on what makes God’s grace so amazing? What is so amazing about grace? God’s grace is not offered to those who think they deserve it. You can’t climb a mountain, swim an ocean, or crawl across a desert to get it--and trust me, history is full of people who have tried to do harder stuff than that to get God’s favor. No, it’s offered only to undeserving sinners. God does not give it to us because of what we’ve done, but in spite of what we’ve done. Another amazing thing about grace is that it is offered to and received by such a wide degree of sinners. Many people are so nice and good that we cannot even perceive that they are sinners. Unless we knew them as well as God does, we might not even categorize them as fallen depraved people in need of a Savior. On the other extreme, you have the truly wild and crazy lustful, greedy, and violent men like King David, Nathan Bedford Forrest, and John Newton. If it were not for their dramatic testimonies, and an obvious repentance to all the people around them, we would never believe their change in heart. David wrote Psalm 51 after his terrible sins of adultery and murder, and he explained how this amazing grace of God works—even for a terrible sinner like him.

Psalm 51 was written by David after his meeting with the prophet Nathan who came to David seeking justice for a terrible crime that had been committed. Nathan told him a parable in 2 Samuel 12 about a rich man who had stolen a poor man’s only baby lamb and eaten it. Even though the rich guy had a great flock of lambs, he took the poor man’s only lamb. Naturally David was outraged at this injustice, and called for the man’s arrest. At that point Nathan yelled out, “you are the man”. Even though David had many wives, he had taken Uriah’s only wife, committed adultery, and then murdered Uriah as part of the cover-up. After David had tried for about a year to cover it up, God sent Nathan to convict David of his sin. To his credit, David did respond appropriately in confessing and repenting, and God forgave him and showed him mercy. A very contrite David wrote Psalm 51 explaining the nature of God’s mercy and grace, and letting us know what he felt like during that year of cover-up as well as the enormous relief of now having a clear conscience with his relationship restored to God. In verse 1-2, David asks for God’s continuing grace which only comes because of God’s great love. The basis of God’s grace and mercy is only God’s love because David fully realized he had no merit on his own. David had failed, yet God does not fail, but continues His commitment to those who approach Him humbly, confess, and rely on God’s grace and mercy. David used three different nouns for his sin--transgressions which are willful acts, iniquity which is his general uncleanness, and sin as a principle or state of being. Thus David’s sin and his cleansing are comprehensive, complete, and far reaching. David’s forgiveness by God covers the whole realm from individual acts to the open rebellion, to just plain old selfishness. David also uses three different verbs for forgiveness here. He asks God to blot out, wash away, and to cleanse him of sin.

**Nathan Bedford Forrest**

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English: Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest (Photo credit: Wikipedia)[/caption]

Nathan Bedford Forrest who we will call Forrest, was one of the most successful Confederate Generals in the Civil War. He had no military training, no formal education, and no military experience before the Civil War. Yet he became the craftiest and most ruthless officer in the Confederate army. He was just a natural born fighter that the Yankees came to fear and hate him above all others. Their opinion of him is best understood by the nickname the Union General Sherman gave him---THE DEVIL. Forrest had a legendary bad temper from an early age, and was known to engage in a series of fights, brawls, and feuds. He was described as being a "Jekyll and Hyde" type character who could be nice to the ladies, but respond violently to any provocation by men. He made his fortune as a slave trader in Memphis, Tenn. Even in the pre-civil war south, that occupation was considered to be very low class. He was a problem gambler, and hung out in some low rent places. After the 1860 election, the southern states began seceding from the Union, and eventually Tennessee also seceded. Forrest enlisted as a private in the Tennessee cavalry, but his reputation as a fighter preceded him, and the Governor of Tennessee commissioned him as a Colonel and asked him to raise his own regiment, which he did and they were known as Forrest's Rangers.

The first great battle of the Civil War fought in the West was at Shiloh. On the first day, the South won a sweeping victory and

drove the Yankees almost back into the Tennessee River, but during the night General Buell's army showed up, and this fresh army drove the Confederates back to their original position. In the retreat, Forrest was given orders to cover the retreat from the rear and hold the Yankees back. At a place called Fallen Timbers, William Tecumseh Sherman's infantry brigade was pressing the attack. Knowing they would never expect an attack by Forrest's small regiment, Forrest ordered an attack that he led. Forrest and his 350 men drove back Sherman's entire brigade with a shocking full speed charge into their midst. Forrest got separated and surrounded, and when he took a gun blast to his side, he reached down and grabbed a Yankee soldier by his coat and pulled him up on his horse using him as a shield from enemy fire. After he was out of range he dumped the poor man on the ground and went on his way. Forrest was 6'2" and over 200 lbs. of muscle and was the closest thing to a Confederate Super Hero they had. These kinds of attacks and exploits were almost a daily affair for Forrest, and we can see why Sherman called him the devil.

Forrest was promoted to a General in 1862, and we have every evidence that the violence and killing were actually quite fun for him. He had 30 confirmed kills just in hand to hand fighting not to mention all that he had shot. In one of his recruiting posters that we recovered he says "Come on boys, if you want a heap of fun and to kill some Yankees." Unfortunately for Forrest, his legacy will always be stained by a nasty massacre late in the war at Fort Pillow.

In April 1864, Fort Pillow on the Mississippi River housed about 600 federal troops, 253 of which were black. On April 12, two southern brigades surrounded the fort. Forrest sent several messages asking for their surrender which they refused. Forrest's men breached the walls and took the fort, but accusations later came out that many who surrendered were shot or executed—especially the black soldiers. There were conflicting reports as to whether Forrest ordered black troops to be shot. After the war there were trials, but they could never prove any crimes were committed at Fort Pillow. Another despicable thing is forever attached to Forrest's legacy that following the Civil War, he organized the Ku Klux Klan. Actually he did not start it or organize it, but he did join it, and was probably the Grand Wizard for a short period of time.

In Shane Kastler's book *NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST'S REDEMPTION*, the author reveals the little known fact that in his later years, Forrest had a dramatic "born again" conversion. Kastler is a Southern Baptist minister. Kastler was the senior pastor at First Christian Church of Pleasanton, Kansas, and has done extensive research on the Civil War and the life of Forrest. During the ten years after the Civil War, he wrote that "life's circumstances and God's providence was leading Forrest to a place of submission." Even though his wife was always a devout Christian, to Forrest Christianity had been a superstition, and was incompatible with his ambitions and lifestyle. Nevertheless, in 1875 Forrest began attending church with his wife. The Reverend George Stainback testified of Forrest's conversion. When Forrest first showed up at church, people were upset because his reputation was that of evil personified. Throughout that year, God brought a parade of Christian witnesses into Forrest's life. The Pastor, his wife, and many friends began sharing the Gospel with him. He had a chance encounter with a Civil War Colonel who had served with him, and was a kindred soul with Forrest. Raleigh White shared that Christ had dramatically changed his life, and now he had become a minister. The ex-Colonel White asked Forrest if he wanted to pray with him, and the two men walked off the street into a bank lobby where they got on their knees and prayed. Apparently the Holy Spirit had planted another seed in his heart because the next Sunday Forrest first heard, understood, and responded to the Gospel when he listened to Rev. Stainback's sermon from Matthew 7:24-27 about the two men who built their houses, one on sand and the other on firm rock. In tears he approached the Rev. Stainback and confessed that he had devoted his life to building his power, pleasures, and pocketbook, but now saw that it was a foundation of sand. Forrest said, "I am a poor miserable sinner". Finally after 54 years of spiritual darkness, Forrest believed in Jesus as his Lord and Savior. The change in

his life was miraculous to all around him. Nathan Bedford Forrest the fighter, gambler, racist, and slave trader was a new creature in Christ. Naturally many doubted him at first, but eventually the change was so real that he was even asked to be the keynote speaker at a meeting of a civil rights group made up of freed black people in the Memphis area. We have a copy of his speech, and it clearly reveals the truth of his repentance. In his pre-Civil War pictures you can see the fire and hatred in his countenance, but in pictures taken in 1875 he looks like a humble man at peace with God and his fellow man.

### **John Newton, the Author of “Amazing Grace”**

John Newton was born in England in 1725. He went to sea at the age of 11, was later impressed into the Royal Navy. Later he worked on a slave ship and eventually became the Captain of a slave trader ship that carried African captives from Africa to the Americas. One day a storm hit them that was so violent that Newton was certain the ship would sink and he would die. He yelled out, “Lord have mercy on us”. They did not sink and the storm subsided, and in reflecting later on this experience, he was certain that God had spoken to him through that storm. He called that day, May 10, 1748 his “day of humiliation”. Eventually he saw the error of his ways and gave up the slave business, and in 1755 he became a surveyor in England where he met the great outdoor evangelist George Whitefield. Newton became a disciple of Whitefield who convinced him to go into the ministry. Newton self schooled himself in Hebrew and Greek and became a minister of a large popular church. Around 1778, the poet William Cowper became his disciple and Cowper encouraged him to write hymns. They collaborated on a hymnal published in 1779 which contained 280 songs written by Newton, one of which was “Amazing Grace”. Newton later became a mentor and influence upon William Wilberforce who led the movement to abolish the slave trade. God had changed his heart and used a former Captain of a slaver to help abolish the slave trade. On John Newton’s tombstone, his epitaph reads, “John Newton, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Gospel which he had long labored to destroy...”

Why has that song, “Amazing Grace” been so popular and had such an impact? I can only answer from my own experience that it expresses so simply what happened to me as well. I was lost and God found me, I was spiritually blind and God opened my eyes, and I was a wretch but Jesus cleansed me.

### **Psalm 51:10-19**

I invite you to read the second part of David’s psalm about his change of heart. He prays that God would now create a new heart in him, and that God’s Spirit would be with him teaching, leading, transforming him from the inside out. Believing that God would do that, David commits to testifying and teaching others about the grace and mercy of God. David wrote that he would “sing of Thy righteousness and declare Thy praise”. Then David confirmed that God doesn’t care about empty religious

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sacrifices and offerings, but God loves a “broken and a contrite heart”. Let us approach God this way whether we have been relatively good people all our lives, or even if we resemble David, Forrest, or Newton.

CHARLIE TAYLOR