

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Amazing Grace

by

Eric Metaxas

1. In the introduction, Eric Metaxas writes: “What Wilberforce vanquished was something worse than slavery. . . . He vanquished the very mind-set that made slavery acceptable” (p. xv). Do any social or political institutions exist today that might be as reprehensible as Wilberforce deemed slavery? If so, how might contemporary Christians successfully vanquish the *mind-set* that allows its existence?
2. Metaxas describes how, during the period of Wilberforce’s youth, religion was in full-scale retreat (p. 7). How would you compare religious sensibilities in Wilberforce’s day with those in our own?
3. In time, as a result of the discouragement of his faith by his mother, Wilberforce temporarily stepped away from his faith. Metaxas writes of his years at Cam-

bridge: “he was headed nowhere in particular, and at a particularly rapid rate” (p. 20). Have you experienced a time in your life that could be described as stepping away from your faith? If you found faith again, how did you do so?

4. Once, when Wilberforce was at Cambridge, he was asked to sign a document assenting to the articles of the Church of England. Though it was standard procedure at the time, Wilberforce refused out of conscience. This in turn delayed the conferral of his degree for many years. “Most people shrugged or winked their way through such hypocrisies; Wilberforce would not” (p. 50). Have you or anyone you know, like Wilberforce, been confronted with a difficult choice? How did you respond?
5. Part of Wilberforce’s resistance to reclaim the faith he possessed in his childhood was his sense that “he knew that if he held a belief he would be obliged to act upon it” (p. 51). What do you make of this conviction? Have you ever felt this way about your beliefs?
6. Metaxas describes Wilberforce’s devotional life in the aftermath of his conversion: “The idea of his sitting and hearing two full hours of Scripture and an hour and a quarter of the dense, philosophical *Pensees* followed by an hour and a quarter of prayer is certainly impressive” (p. 55). Given what Wilberforce accomplished, what change do you think such a devotional regimen might affect in your life—and in the world?

7. Metaxas tells us that Wilberforce made a list of his vices and “kept track of how often he failed and endeavored to improve his record” (p. 67). What are the ways you have endeavored to improve in some of the weaker areas of your life?
8. On the cusp of Wilberforce’s decision to mount a protracted campaign in Parliament to abolish the slave trade, his close friend William Pitt advised him, “Do not lose time or the ground will be occupied by another” (p. 113). This compelled Wilberforce to commit wholeheartedly to becoming actively involved in this issue. What issue do you feel compelled to advocate for or against? Does it require a wholehearted commitment? What might you lose by not acting quickly?
9. Metaxas writes: “The slave interests acquitted themselves particularly poorly at this time. . . . [They] behaved like children who switch stories every time the current story is contradicted with new facts” (p. 125). In other words, to serve their ends, those who benefited from the slave trade changed the narrative to avoid the harsh facts of the trade. Though not directly involved with the slave trade, would you consider the slave interests’ deception to be a manifestation of evil? Why?
10. Josiah Wedgwood’s iconic image of an African in chains, kneeling and asking the question “Am I not a man and a brother?” (p. 131), had a powerful impact in changing the tide of public opinion about the slave trade. It is an example of using art as a form of dissent. What art form might create a similar impact in today’s

world? Can you think of a modern example of how you've seen art used effectively in this way?

11. John Wesley died in 1791 at a time when the battle for abolition was ongoing and unresolved. Metaxas highlights a letter Wesley wrote Wilberforce when he was near death: “Just before entering his rest he had, as it were, extended his hand to his spiritual son and handed him the baton for this particular leg of the race *contra mundum* [against the world]” (p. 145). What do you make of this idea? Have you ever been “handed a baton” or asked to continue working on a project or cause? What was your response?
12. At one point when the battle for abolition faltered, some equivocators began pushing for “regulation” of the slave trade rather than all-out abolition. Do you believe an institution that is inherently evil can be “regulated” (pp. 151–52)?
13. Related to this, Metaxas explores the notion of the “banality of evil”—that is, “the disturbing idea that the sufferings of men, women, and children should continue as a result of the laziness of a handful of politicians” (p. 165). Do you believe that distraction, inaction, and neglect can be forms of evil? Do you see any parallels in our modern political system?
14. Wilberforce took offense with Christian hypocrisy and even Christian mediocrity. “He wanted to expose these ministers for what they were: dishonest members of a caste that refused to be thrown out [of their pulpits] because they had, as it were, a good thing

going” (p. 169). Did Wilberforce, by going straight to parishioners to make this case, assume a prerogative that was not his to assume? Was he justified? How might you respond if he were to make the same case before you?

15. Edmund Burke, a key member of the House of Commons, read Wilberforce’s book¹ on his deathbed. “[Burke] derived much comfort from it and . . . if he lived he would thank Wilberforce for having sent such a book into the world” (p. 172). Have you ever read a book that was so influential in your life? If so, give an example. What legacy would you like to leave in this world?
16. In his campaign to overturn the law that forbade missionaries to enter India, Wilberforce took on “a more explicitly religious tone than he had ever taken before or would after” (p. 231). Arguing less from a place of spiritual concern and more from highlighting the benefits that befall a society defined by Christian values, he won the argument. Would such a tactic work effectively in today’s cultural environment? If it were to work, what kinds of statistics might be brought to bear to make a case for the positive societal influence of Christianity?
17. Convincing France to end the slave trade was an ongoing concern of Wilberforce’s. Ultimately, it took the despotic actions of rebelling Napoleon to accomplish it,

1. *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country Contrasted with Real Christianity.*

though only because it served his own purposes (pp. 242–43). Could it be said that God uses even tyrants to fulfill his purposes? What do you think of this idea?

18. When he was announcing his retirement from public life, Wilberforce wrote to a friend: “We alone know ourselves the opportunities we have enjoyed, and the comparative use we have made of them. Yet I am but too conscious of numerous and great sins of omission, many opportunities of doing good whether not at all or very inadequately improved” (p. 266). Reflecting on the opportunities you have enjoyed in your life, and the actions you did not take, what can you learn?
19. Metaxas concludes that Wilberforce fought fiercely for justice but tempered every battle with grace (p. 272). Reflect on the battles you have faced, and measure your demeanor against Wilberforce’s. Where do you stand? What, if anything, has this book inspired you to do?