



0. Amazing Grace - Story Preface

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Portrait of William Wilberforce by Karl Anton Hickel in 1794 maintained by Hull Museums (Wilberforce House Museum) Collections at Kingston-upon-Hull, U.K. Image online courtesy, Wikimedia Commons.

*Having heard all of this
you may choose to look the other way
but you can never again say
that you did not know.*

William Wilberforce
Speech to Parliament
May 12, 1789

William Wilberforce had the evidence. His friend, Thomas Clarkson, had scoured the British countryside, looking for proof:

- He had talked with sailors who crewed on the ships.
- He had interviewed witnesses who spoke of the crimes.
- He had held in his hands the cruel restraints.
- He had heard from passengers who'd barely survived.

Wilberforce had the evidence, but he faced a very difficult problem. Britain's slave trade was legal, so the crimes weren't crimes and the wrongs weren't punishable.

As one hundred thousand Africans were wrenched from their homes every year - to become "owned" by foreigners - people in the slave-trading business could ignore their plight because Parliament allowed it.

With extraordinary dedication, however, the Cambridge University essayist (Clarkson) and Parliament's

youngest member (Wilberforce) staked out a new path.

Their journey, to legalize Britain's slave trade, would take twenty years.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Amazing-Grace>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Amazing-Grace>

Questions 2 Ponder

Why Do Governments Pass Immoral Laws?

As 100,000 Africans were wrenched from their homes every year, to become “owned” by foreigners, slave traders were legally going about their kidnapping business.

People could ignore the horrific consequences of slave-trading because Parliament allowed it. That means British law allowed slave-trading.

How could it ever be that a business of buying-and-selling-people was lawful?

Although slave-trading was legal, under British law, were such legal actions moral? Explain your answer.

If not, does that mean government-enacted laws can sometimes be immoral? Explain your answer.

How Do We Change a Law Which Permits a Crime?

During the slave-trading era, when Africans were kidnapped and sold, no one was arrested for kidnapping and human trafficking because those crimes were not called crimes. If a crime is not called a crime, it isn't considered a crime, under the law.

That means wrongdoing was not wrongdoing, and people can't be punished if they don't engage in wrongdoing.

We could therefore say that laws allowing the buying-and-selling of people were immoral laws.

Aren't laws supposed to be moral? Explain your answer.

If a law is immoral, how can it be changed?

Can you think of any laws, today, which are legal-but-immoral? What are they?

What Happens When Immoral Laws Aren't Challenged?

If “the law” allows the buying-and-selling of people, who then become free laborers for others, money is made from kidnapping and human trafficking. When the business is lucrative for many people, those who oppose such activities could be in the minority.

If people who oppose immoral laws are in the minority, their lobbying efforts to challenge the law may “fall on deaf ears.” The deaf ears exist because people who make the laws often prefer to please the majority of people.

What happens if everyone just “goes along” with an immoral law?

If individuals harmed by such a law have no power to change it, how would the law ever get changed?

If an immoral law doesn't impact you—or someone you love—is it realistic to expect that you'd do anything to bring about change? Why, or why not?

What 21st-century laws do you consider immoral? What can be done to change such laws?

Why Did It Take So Long to Make Slave-trading Illegal?

Before William Wilberforce told Members of Parliament about the wrongs of slave-trading, his colleagues had gathered evidence of abuses.

In 1789, Wilberforce presented a long list of those abuses in Parliament, thereafter telling the MPs:

Having heard all of this you may choose to look the other way but you can never again say that you did not know.

Every year, from and after 1789, Wilberforce asked Parliament to change the laws which allowed slave-trading.

Every year, for 18 years, Parliament did not change the law.

Why do you think that Members of Parliament, to use Wilberforce's words, chose to "look the other way?"

If lawmakers have evidence that a law is wrong - and that actions which are legal are harming many people - what possible reasons could they have to keep the law in force?

Media Stream



William Wilberforce

Image online, courtesy of theartofmanliness.com website.

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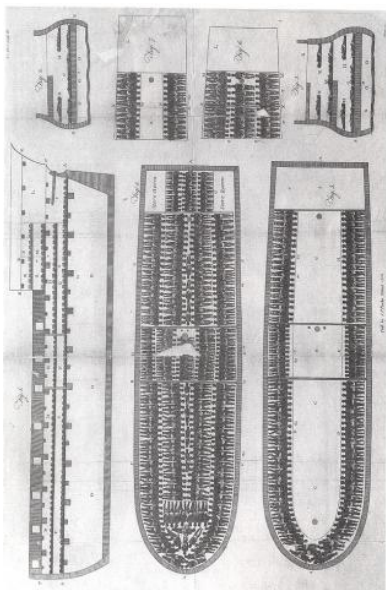


Thomas Clarkson

Online image, courtesy Bristol Radical History Group.

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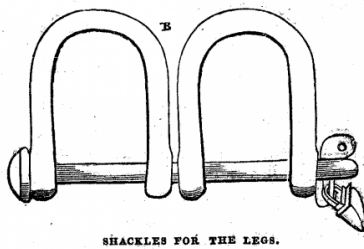
Layout of a Slave Ship

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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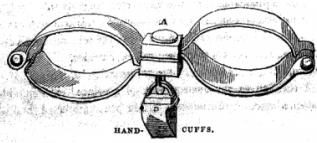
Leg Shackles - Slave Trade

Image online, courtesy the [Port Cities Bristol](http://www.portcitiesbristol.com) website.

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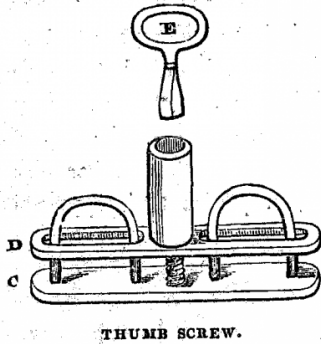
Slave Handcuffs - Slave Trade

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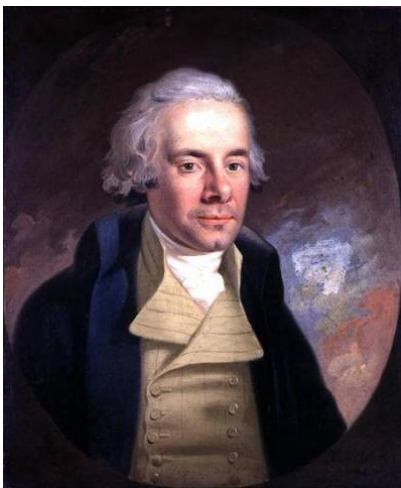
Thumb Screw - Slave Trade

Image online, courtesy the [Port Cities Bristol](http://www.portcitiesbristol.com) website.

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