

John Newton and God's Amazing Grace

"Amazing Grace!" You'll hear it played solemnly at a funeral. You'll hear it sung thrillingly by a choir. And you'll hear it sung tenderly by all who have experienced that amazing grace. It is probably the most famous hymn in history. It is actually a poetic diary of its author, John Newton, who enshrined his own experience in the words he wrote.

Childhood

John Newton was born in 1725. His mother was a Christian who taught him at an early age the Bible, the Westminster Catechism, and the hymns of Isaac Watts. She prayed that he would become a Gospel preacher when he grew up. But she died of tuberculosis in 1732 when John was six. His new stepmother had no spiritual interests and did not seem even to want John around. His father, a merchant navy captain, spent months at sea. Left to himself, John's behavior grew worse and worse. Years later, Newton wrote in his *Narrative* that he was in school only two of all his growing-up years, (from ages 8 to 10). Finally his father began taking him on voyages to keep him out of trouble. He was only 11 years old when he went on his first of six sea-voyages with his father. The rough sailors were hardly good role models. By the time he returned from sea, John seemed to have forgotten all that his mother had taught him in his early years. About his relationship with his father, he wrote: *"I am persuaded he loved me, but he seemed not willing that I should know it. I was with him in a state of fear and bondage. His sternness ... broke and overawed my spirit."*

"A wretch like me ..."

In 1744, when he was 18, he was press-ganged into naval service against his will and sailed away bitterly on the HMS Harwich as a midshipman. His friend and biographer, Richard Cecil, says, *"The companions he met with here completed the ruin of his principles."* He himself wrote, *"I was capable of anything; I had not the least fear of God before my eyes, nor (so far as I remember) the least sensibility of conscience."* On one of his visits home he deserted the ship. He was caught, imprisoned, publicly stripped and flogged, and degraded from his office.

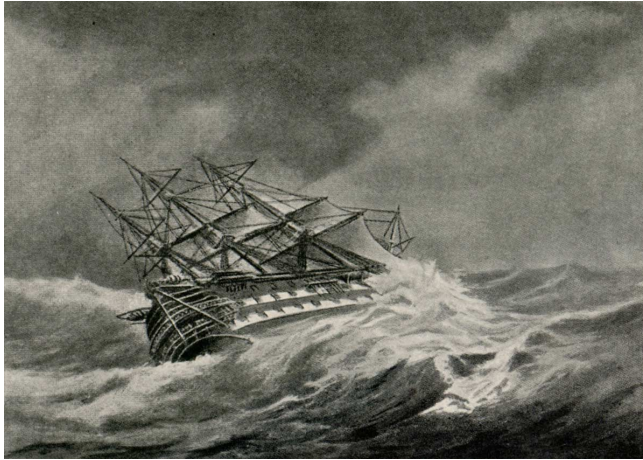
"I once was lost ..."

When he was 20 years old he was put off his ship on some small islands just southeast of Sierra Leone, West Africa. For about a year and a half he lived as a virtual slave in almost destitute circumstances. The wife of his master despised him and treated him cruelly. Even the African slaves tried to smuggle him food from their meager rations. Later in life he marveled at the seemingly accidental way a ship dropped anchor off his island after seeing some smoke, and just *happened* to be the ship with a captain who knew Newton's father and managed to free him from his bondage. That was February, 1747. He was not quite 21, and God was about to speak loudly to John Newton.

"But now am found ..."

The ship he was now on, the *Greyhound*, was a Liverpool ship. It had business on the seas for over a year. On its homeward journey, the ship was caught in a terrible storm. Newton awoke in the night, his room beginning to fill with water. As he ran for the deck, the captain stopped him and sent him back to fetch a knife. *The man who went up in his place was immediately washed overboard.* Newton was assigned to the pumps and blurted out, *"If this will not do, the Lord have mercy upon us."* It was the first time he had expressed the need for mercy in many years. The ship lurched and rocked as the violent storm raged. Climbing the huge waves, the ship plunged time after time, crashing into the ocean on the other side. With each fall, more and more of the ship's contents spilled into the raging water. As an experienced sailor, John Newton had ridden out many fierce storms before, but he had never come this close to death. The *Greyhound* thrashed about in the North Atlantic storm for over a week. Its canvas sails were ripped, and the wood on one side of the ship had been torn away and splintered. The sailors had little hope of survival, but they mechanically worked the pumps, trying to keep the vessel afloat. John worked the pumps from three in the morning until noon, slept for an hour, and then took the helm

and steered the ship till midnight. At the wheel he had time to think back over his life and his spiritual condition. His life seemed as ruined and wrecked as the battered ship he was trying to steer through the storm. Since the age of eleven he had lived a life at sea. Sailors were not noted for the refinement of



their manners, but Newton, known as “The Great Blasphemer,” had a reputation for profanity, coarseness, and debauchery which even shocked many sailors. Newton had been reading Thomas a Kempis’s popular The Imitation of Christ, and was struck by a line about the “uncertain continuance of life.” He recalled some of the Scriptures and hymns from Isaac Watts’ Divine Songs for Children that his mother had taught him. He remembered Proverbs 1:24-31, and in the midst of that storm, those verses seemed to confirm Newton in his despair: *“Because I have called, and ye refused ... ye have set at*

nought all My counsel, and would none of My reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh: when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish come upon you. Then shall they call upon Me, but I will not answer.” Newton had rejected his mother’s teachings and had led other sailors into unbelief. Certainly he was beyond hope and beyond saving. *“I concluded my sins were too great to be forgiven. I waited with fear and impatience to receive my doom.”* But soon he heard the glad news that the ship was freed of water.

“Was blind but now I see ...”

John found a New Testament and began to read. Luke 11:13 seemed to assure him that God might still hear him: “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him.” *“I thought I saw the hand of God displayed in our favor. I began to pray: I could not utter the prayer of faith; I could not draw near to a reconciled God, and call him Father I began ...to think of that Jesus that I had so often derided; I recollected His death: a death for sins not His own, but, as I remembered, for the sake of those who should put their trust in Him.”*

“How precious did that grace appear ...”

That day, March 21, 1748, was a day Newton remembered ever after. From that night at age 23 to the year he died at age 82 he marked the day of his awakening on board the Greyhound with fasting, prayer and thankful rededication of his life to Jesus. As an old man he wrote, *“The 21st in March, is a day much to be remembered by me, and I have never suffered it to pass wholly unnoticed since the year 1748. On that day the LORD sent from on high, and delivered me out of the deep waters.”* As an old man, Newton wrote in his diary of March 21, 1805: *“Not well able to write; but I endeavor to observe the return of this day with humiliation, prayer, and praise.”* Only God’s amazing grace could and would take a rude, profane, slave-trading sailor and transform him into a child of God.” Newton never ceased to stand in awe of God’s work in his life.

He spent all the rest of the voyage in deep seriousness as he read and prayed over the Scriptures. On April 8 they anchored in Ireland. The next day, the storm at sea was so violent that had they not been safely at anchor they most certainly would have perished.

After leaving the sea in 1755, Newton took the job of tide surveyor at Liverpool. He held Bible studies in his Liverpool home. Influenced by the Wesleys and George Whitefield, he became increasingly disgusted with the slave trade and his role in it. He began to wonder whether God was calling him to preach the Gospel. He was especially taken by George Whitefield and was even called by some “Little Whitefield.” He devoted himself to a rigorous program of self-study and applied himself to Greek and Hebrew and

Syriac. He said, *"I was in some hopes that perhaps, sooner or later, [Christ] might call me into His service. I believe it was a distant hope of this that determined me to study the original Scriptures."*

"'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far ..."

In 1764, his mother's prayers for her son were answered when, at the age of thirty-nine, John Newton began forty-three years of preaching the Gospel of Christ, starting in the market-town of Olney. Three years later, the poet William Cowper moved to Olney. Newton preached the Gospel in Olney for almost 16 years. For the Sunday evening services, Newton often composed a hymn which developed the lessons and Scripture for that evening. In 1779, two hundred and eighty of these were collected and combined with sixty-eight hymns by Newton's friend Cowper, and published as the *Olney Hymns*. The most famous of all the *Olney Hymns* was titled "Faith's Review and Expectation." It grew out of David's statements in I Chronicles 17:16-17. Today, we call that hymn "Amazing Grace."

In 1779, at the age of 54, Newton left Olney to become rector of St. Mary Woolnoth in London. He preached there for more than a quarter of a century, becoming one of the period's foremost evangelical preachers. His ministry included not only the London poor and the merchant class but also the wealthy and influential. William Wilberforce, a Member of Parliament and a prime mover in the abolition of slavery, was strongly influenced by John Newton's life and preaching. In 1787 Newton wrote *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* to help William Wilberforce's campaign to end the slave trade. This essay was very important in securing British abolition of slavery. Newton called the slave trade "a business at which my heart now shudders." The last time he was in the pulpit of St. Mary's was in October 1806 when he was 81 years old. His eyes and ears were failing. His good friend Richard Cecil had suggested he cease preaching when he turned 80, to which Newton had responded, *"What! Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?"*

"And grace will lead me home ..."

He died December 21, 1807 at the age of 82. A month before he died he expressed his settled faith: *"It is a great thing to die; and, when flesh and heart fail, to have God for the strength of our heart, and our portion forever. I know whom I have believed, and He is able to keep that which I have committed against that great day. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me that day."* From his last will and testament we read: *"I commit my soul to my gracious God and Savior, who mercifully spared and preserved me, when I was an apostate, a blasphemer, and an infidel, and delivered me from the state of misery on the coast of Africa into which my obstinate wickedness had plunged me; and who has been pleased to admit me (though most unworthy) to preach His glorious gospel."*



John Newton's tomb in Olney

Originally buried at St Mary Woolnoth, London, his remains and his wife Mary's were re-interred here in 1893. The inscription on the opposite side reads:

*"John Newton, Clerk,
Once an infidel and libertine,
A servant of slaves in Africa,
Was, by the rich mercy
Of our LORD and SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST,
Preserved, restored, pardoned,
And appointed to preach the faith
He had long laboured to destroy.
Near 16 years as Curate of this parish
And 28 years as Rector of St Mary Woolnoth."*