



PROFILE IN FAITH

“Amazing Grace”

John Newton and His Great Hymn

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As a parish priest serving at Olney, England, John Newton made a practice of writing hymns to accompany his sermons.¹ The Scripture text for the New Year’s service on January 1, 1773, was 1 Chronicles 17:16–17, a prayer of King David’s in which he asks, “Who am I, O LORD God, and what is mine house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?”² As Newton reflected on these words, he thought of how God’s grace had found him in his sin and brought him to a place of honor as a minister of the gospel. Over the next few days, he wrote the hymn we call “Amazing Grace.” He gave it the title “Faith’s Review and Expectation.” In the first three verses, Newton reviews God’s grace in his life thus far; in the next three, he states his certainty that God’s grace will lead him on and at last to heaven.

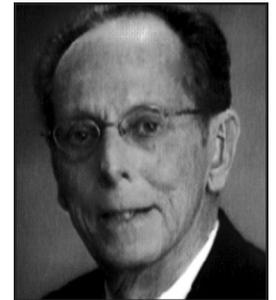
Newton’s Life

*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.*

John Newton’s father was a seaman. His mother was a godly woman who taught him the Shorter Catechism and the hymns of Isaac Watts. She died when John was six years old, and the little boy resolved to honor his mother’s memory by growing up to be a preacher. On his eleventh birthday (1736), after two miserable years at a boarding school, John went to sea with his father. His unsettled behavior and lack of discipline created

many problems for himself, his father, and his shipmates.

During a time at home, he was “impressed” into the Royal Navy. Overstaying a leave, he was arrested as a deserter and publicly flogged. Later he was transferred to a merchant ship bound for Africa. In Sierra Leone Newton worked for a merchant whose African wife brutally mistreated him whenever she could. He had become, as he later described himself, “a servant of slaves in Africa.” He escaped his miserable life by joining the crew of a slave ship. He now felt that he could do as he pleased. He was given to such profanity that the captain, who himself was “not at all circumspect in his expressions,” seriously reprovved him.³ The “cargo” of the slave ship included African women and girls, naked and available to any of the crew. Newton never said that he used the slave girls, but he later described his moral condition in the words of 2 Peter 2:14—“Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin.” Newton later wrote, “The troubles and miseries . . . were my own. I brought them upon myself, by forsaking [God’s] good and pleasant paths and choosing the way of transgressors which I found very hard; they led to slavery, contempt, famine and despair.”⁴



David B. Calhoun, Ph.D.

*’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears reliev’d;
How precious did that grace appear,
the hour I first believed!*

Newton was tempted to throw himself into the sea to drown, but, he later wrote, “The secret hand of God restrained me.”⁵ The memory of his godly mother and also his love for Mary Catlett, whom he had met in 1743, when she was fourteen and he was seventeen, gave him reason to live.

John Newton decided to stay on the Guinea coast and seek his fortune as an agent in the slave trade. His life seemed to be going well, he enjoyed his work, and pleasure was easy to come by. He was “governed by present appearances, and looked no further,” he wrote, but he came to see that “He who is eyes to the blind” was leading him in uncharted paths.⁶

Leaving Africa in 1748 on the *Greyhound*, a slave ship bound for the American colonies, Newton found a copy of Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ* and, to pass the time, began to read it with indifference. Suddenly he was startled to be asking, “What if these things should be true?”

About this time a brutal gale struck the ship. Newton cried out, “The Lord have mercy on us.” Though he’d said it flippantly, he was “instantly struck” with his own words.⁷ “What mercy can there be for me? The ship’s chief blasphemer, the loudest swearer, the man who mocked the Lord’s existence. What mercy can there be for me?”⁸ Miraculously the ship survived. Was this the hour John Newton first believed? As long as he lived, he remembered March 21 as the anniversary of his conversion. “He who takes notice of the cries of the young ravens in their nests,” Newton wrote, “was pleased to hear mine.”⁹ He began to read the New Testament, but “how faint and wavering were my first returns to Thee.”¹⁰

When the battered *Greyhound* finally reached the coast of Ireland, John Newton went to church, received Communion, and “engaged to be the Lord’s forever, and only His.”¹¹ But Newton had much to learn as a Christian. During his next voyage, he found himself unable to live up to his spiritual goals. Falling into a time of despair, he became gravely ill. Even so, he was enabled to cast himself upon God’s mercy, a turning point as decisive as the storm of the previous spring. He thought, “What a poor creature I am in myself, incapable of standing a single hour without continual fresh supplies of strength and grace from the fountain-head.”¹²

*Thro’ many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.*

Newton’s life is a story of many dangers—a runaway horse when he was a boy, illness in Africa, storms at sea, slave revolts onboard ship, a hunting accident in Ireland. There were many toils. Newton did rough work as a seaman with his father, as a midshipman in the navy, and as “a servant of slaves in Africa.” And there were many snares. Early on he espoused a deism that freed him from the moral constraints his mother’s faith had fastened on him. Deism led to atheism. Newton wrote later, “I believed my own lie.”¹³ But God’s grace kept Newton safe and brought him safely home to England.

*The Lord has promis’d good to me,
His Word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
as long as life endures.*

God promised good to John Newton and kept His word. God gave him the love of his life in his marriage to Mary Catlett. John and Mary—he called her Polly—were married on February 1, 1750. At this time John’s spiritual light “was like the first faint streaks of an early dawn, and Polly “was not lacking in polite religion, but knew nothing of a pilgrimage of faith.”¹⁴ However, John Newton’s spiritual understanding slowly grew and so did Mary’s.

After his marriage Newton made three voyages as the master of a slave-trading ship. During some weeks in Charleston, South Carolina, while his ship was being prepared for its return to England, Newton attended services at the Independent Church and prayed in woods and fields outside the town. On his last voyage, he met Alex Clunie in the West Indies. Clunie, a fellow ship-captain, “not only informed my understanding but his discourses inflamed my heart,” Newton wrote.¹⁵ From Clunie Newton learned the meaning of grace as “the free and unmerited favour of God.”¹⁶

As captain of a slave ship, and a Christian, John Newton tried to deal fairly with both the crew and the slaves. After a time, however, he became troubled by the fact that his employment was “perpetually conversant with chains, bolts, and shackles,” and he prayed that God would open to him “a more humane calling.”¹⁷

Newton came to hate and despise what he was doing, although most people in England saw it as a very legitimate and rewarding business. He later described “the dreadful effects of the slave trade on the minds of those who engage in it.”¹⁸ When the College of New Jersey (Princeton) sent word that they had given him

an honorary doctor of divinity, he commented that “the dreary coast of Africa had been his university” and that he would never accept any diploma “except from the poor blacks.”¹⁹ Newton was amazed at what God had done for him. He wrote, “I can see no reason why the Lord singled me out for mercy . . . unless it was to show, by one astonishing instance, that with Him ‘nothing is impossible.’”²⁰

In 1754, as he waited for his ship to be prepared for another voyage to Africa, Newton suddenly became seriously ill. Doctors could not readily diagnose his sickness, but they warned him not to sail. John and Polly returned to their home in Chatham. Walking with his Bible in the Kentish hills, he enjoyed “the music of the birds in the great temple of nature, which the Lord has built for His own honour,” and was able to concentrate his thoughts in prayer and refrain from worry, either about Polly or their future.²¹

Fully recovered from his mysterious illness, Newton secured a position in Liverpool as a tide surveyor—inspecting import cargoes. His job provided prestige and a good salary, but he was more and more convinced that he ought to be a pastor. He and Mary hosted Christian meetings in their home, and soon people began calling him “young Whitefield.” He had friends among the Dissenters, but decided that the Church of England, with all its faults, was the best way to reach people. Church officials discouraged him, pointing to his scant education but probably equally concerned by his evangelical fervor. Polly encouraged him to be patient. He wrote that she “kept me quiet until the Lord’s time came when I should have the desire of my heart. The Lord’s time is like the time of the tide, which no human power can either accelerate or retard.”²²

Lord Dartmouth, a prominent evangelical, offered Newton the curacy of the parish church at Olney in Buckinghamshire and persuaded the bishop of London to ordain him, nearly forty years old. The people of Olney welcomed a man who loved and cared for them, and he preached a message they could understand. He often said that the point in all his preaching was “to break a hard heart and to heal a broken heart.”²³ The congregation grew, and people came from near and far to seek his pastoral care and counsel. One was the talented and troubled poet, William Cowper, who moved to Olney in 1767 to be near Newton. Together they wrote and in 1779 published a volume titled *Olney Hymns*, which included Newton’s now-famed “Amazing Grace.”

Newton reached beyond Olney with a ministry of counsel and consolation by writing letters, published

as *Cardiphonia*, or *The Utterance of the Heart*. Alexander Whyte believed that John Newton’s “most distinctive office in the great Evangelical Revival was to be a writer of spiritual letters.”²⁴ Newton’s autobiography or testimony, *An Authentic Narrative*, became a popular, treasured book.

In 1780 John Newton became minister at St. Mary Woolnoth in London. “London is the last situation I should have chosen for myself,” Newton said. “I love woods and fields and streams and trees—to hear the bird sing and the sheep bleat.”²⁵ It was a matter of awe to him that he was called to a London church—“that one of the most ignorant, the most miserable and the most abandoned of slaves should be plucked from his forlorn state of exile on the coast of Africa and at length be appointed minister of the parish of the first magistrate of the first city in the world.”²⁶ One of the few evangelical preachers in London, Newton attracted people from all over the city to hear his sermons. One series of fifty sermons was based on the texts of Handel’s *Messiah* which was enjoying spectacularly successful performances at Westminster Abbey during 1784 and 1785.

Newton became much more outspoken in his opposition to the slave trade. In his *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, Newton stated, “I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”²⁷ The 2006 film *Amazing Grace* highlights Newton’s influence on William Wilberforce. Newton lived to see Wilberforce’s long, hard campaign succeed when the British slave trade was abolished on March 25, 1807.

Mary Newton died on December 15, 1790. John’s love for Mary is one of the great love stories of all time. When she was away, he wrote to her, “I am always a little awkward without you, and every room where you are not present looks unfurnished.”²⁸ “The Bank of England is too poor to compensate for such a loss as mine,” he wrote at her death.²⁹ Newton published his *Letters to a Wife* in 1793. He called Polly “my pleasing companion, my most affectionate friend, my judicious counselor.” In his last letter to her he wrote, “I shall never find words fully to tell you how much I owe you, how truly I love you.”³⁰ John Newton remembered the first anniversary of her death by writing a hymn of thirty-eight verses!

*Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
and mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil,*

a life of joy and peace.

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
the sun forbear to shine;
But God, who call'd me here below,
will be forever mine.*

John Newton continued to preach as long as he was able. When his eyesight began to fail, a servant stood behind him in the pulpit with a pointer to help him follow the words on his manuscript. In one sermon Newton said the words “Jesus Christ is precious,” and then repeated them. His servant, thinking he was getting confused, whispered, “Go on, go on; you said that before.” Newton, looking around, replied loudly, “John, I said that twice, and I’m going to say it again.” And then he thundered, “Jesus Christ is precious!”³¹

Newton lingered until four days before Christmas 1807, “packed and sealed,” he quipped, “and waiting for the post.”³² As he died at age eighty-two, he whispered to a friend, “My memory is nearly gone. But I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour.”³³ Newton wrote in his *Letters to a Wife*, “How wonderful must be the moment after death!”³⁴ We wish that he could tell us about it!

In his epitaph Newton summed up his life in these words, “John Newton, 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 labored to destroy.”³⁵ Newton had painted over his study fireplace at Olney words from Isaiah 43:4 and Deuteronomy 15:15—“Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, [. . .] BUT thou shalt remember that thou wast a bond-man in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee.” John Newton’s life was a good illustration of his best-known hymn.

Newton’s Hymn

Between John Newton’s death and the start of the American Civil War, the words of “Amazing Grace” crossed the Atlantic and were set to the now-familiar tune. William Walker, a singing instructor from Spartanburg, South Carolina, included it in his immensely popular hymnbook of 1835, *The Southern Harmony*, where Walker joined it with the tune called “New Britain.” The tune is thought to be a traditional American melody, although it may have Scottish roots. Steve Turner writes that “not only did the words fit

snugly into the required musical space but the music enhanced the meaning. It was a marriage made in heaven.” And it was to become “America’s most beloved song.”³⁶

“Amazing Grace” was sung in churches throughout the South and was adopted by African Americans as a song that told their story as well as John Newton’s. Between the end of the Civil War and the start of the First World War, “Amazing Grace” was made known across America through revival campaigns, and a new verse was added.³⁷ It reached the cities of the North through the preaching of D.L. Moody and the singing of his associate, Ira Sankey.

In the twentieth century, “Amazing Grace” gained great popularity in gospel music, urban folk music, and even pop and rock. One of the best-known gospel recordings was by Mahalia Jackson in 1947. She took over two minutes to get through the first stanza, savoring each word and exploring the song’s deeper meaning! Later Aretha Franklin’s singing of two stanzas took fourteen minutes, as she pulled the tune “apart wide enough to let the spirit in.”³⁸

“Doc” Watson, who helped popularize the hymn in modern folk music, summed up its message:

*When Jesus went to that cross it took more than what old-timers called “biting the bullet.” It was him showing that he loved us all enough that by the grace of God he would pay the sin debt for us on the cross and his grace showed me the way to go. The amazing grace of God is what the song is about.*³⁹

By the midsixties “Amazing Grace” had become a folk favorite, popularized by Joan Baez, who spoke of the song’s “magical effect.”⁴⁰ The a cappella single recording released by Judy Collins in December 1970 climbed into the bestseller charts in both Britain and America early in 1971. “Amazing Grace” played by the bagpipes of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards sold more than 16 million copies worldwide. There are now more than eleven hundred currently available albums featuring versions of “Amazing Grace.” It is found in more than a thousand hymnals and is sung in many lands and languages. Newton scholar Jonathan Aitken estimates that it is performed about 10 million times every year.⁴¹

For many people “Amazing Grace” has become “a song rather than a hymn, a story of self-determination rather than divine rescue.”⁴² But for many others it means exactly what John Newton meant when he

wrote it. His great hymn is “not only the story of his life but the essence of his message. He was a man appalled at the depths of his sinfulness and amazed at the heights of God’s mercy.”⁴³

Notes

1. There are perhaps a hundred or more books on the life of John Newton. Most of these are popular accounts of his amazing story. One of the best is John Pollock’s *Amazing Grace: John Newton’s Story* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). For a scholarly treatment, see Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). For a history of Newton’s greatest hymn, see Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song* (New York: Ecco, 2002).

2. Scripture quotations are from the *King James Version*.

3. John Henry Johansen, *The Olney Hymns* (New York: The Hymn Society of America, 1956), 14.

4. Pollock, *Amazing Grace*, 62–63.

5. *Ibid.*, 47.

6. Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 37.

7. *Ibid.*, 42.

8. Pollock, *Amazing Grace*, 74.

9. John Newton, *Letters to a Wife* (London: T. Hamilton, 1821),

v.

10. Pollock, *Amazing Grace*, 87.

11. *Ibid.*, 89.

12. *Ibid.*, 97.

13. *Ibid.*, 40.

14. *Ibid.*, 103.

15. *Ibid.*, 126.

16. Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 63.

17. Josiah Bull, *John Newton: An Autobiography and Narrative* (1868), 60–61.

18. Pollock, *Amazing Grace*, 95.

19. *Ibid.*, 173.

20. *Ibid.*, 79.

21. *Ibid.*, 132.

22. *Ibid.*, 149.

23. *Ibid.*, 155.

24. John Newton, *Voice of the Heart: Cardiphonia* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1950), 23.

25. Pollock, *Amazing Grace*, 169.

26. *Ibid.*, 170.

27. Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 91.

28. Pollock, *Amazing Grace*, 165.

29. Newton, *Letters to a Wife*, 297.

30. *Ibid.*, 284.

31. Johansen, *The Olney Hymns*, 8.

32. Pollock, *Amazing Grace*, 182.

33. *Ibid.*, 182.

34. Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 91.

35. *Ibid.*, 108.

36. *Ibid.*, 124.

37. The new stanza, not by Newton, reads: “When we’ve

been there ten thousand years, / Bright shining as the sun, / We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise, / Than when we first begun.” This stanza first appeared with “Amazing Grace” in a hymnbook in 1909. These lines, however, are found with some verses from Newton’s hymn in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, published in 1852. They are usually attributed to John Rees (1828–1900).

38. Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 189.

39. *Ibid.*, 172.

40. *Ibid.*, 173.

41. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 224.

42. Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 175.

43. *Ibid.*, 222–23.

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