

Amazing Grace

Biblical insights from the life of John Newton

Various Scriptures

BI: “Then let me boast with holy Paul; I am nothing, Christ is all.”

We have called this series of annual messages on heroes from church history Imitate Their Faith because that’s what the Scriptures repeatedly exhorts us to do. One example is found in Hebrews 13 where the author writes, “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering their conduct, imitate their faith.” This morning I want to talk about a man whom you have all heard of and whose life, I think, is worthy of imitation. That is to say, in this man’s life I see examples of faithfulness in loving Christ and being obedience to God’s word that should challenge us toward greater love of Christ and obedience to God’s word. His name is John Newton. And you know him as the author of the song, Amazing Grace.

I want to begin by offering a brief biography of Newton’s life and ministry and then talk about some specific areas of his life that I think are worthy of imitation.

I. Biography:

1. John Newton was born in London July 24, 1725 (51 years before the American Revolution). By the providence of God He found himself parented by a godly mother and an irreligious father. Early on his mother, convinced that her life would be shortened by consumption, determined to teach her son everything she could about God and His word while she had time. She focused on instructing him with the Westminster Catechism and the hymns of Isaac Watts. Then she died when John was 6 years old.
2. After her death, John’s Father remarried and left the boy mainly to himself while he traveled the world as a respectable sea captain. Writing about his father Newton later said, “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.”¹ With the death of his mother went the death of his education as well. As an adult he would recollect that of all his growing up years he was in school only two of them (ages 8-10) and never received any other formal training. For the rest of his life he would be self-taught. He never received a theological education.
3. One day an invitation arrived from his aunt on his mother’s side asking if John would pay her family visit in a distant town. He didn’t want to go but his father insisted.

¹ John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance*, (Crossway, 2002), 46

Reluctantly he obeyed, and when he knocked on their door it was opened by a beautiful girl, the eldest daughter of the house, Mary Catlett. He would write later, “Almost at first sight of this girl I felt an affection for her that never abated.” Young John Newton had fallen in love. Problem was, he was 17 years old, and she was only 13. More than that, she was his cousin. In the mystery of God’s providence, however, they would eventually be drawn to Christ, get married and enjoy 40 years of church ministry together.

4. For a few years after this John traveled the seas with his father. After one of these trips he went on a walk alone in the countryside and found himself face to face with what was called a press gang. This was a group of English sailors who would be sent into town when a warship needed more hands on deck. They caught Newton and “pressed” (or kidnapped) him into service aboard ship. He was 18 years old. Because he had previous experience as a seaman under his father, he was granted a higher rank than other boys who were pressed into service, but he didn’t keep it very long because he proved to be such a blasphemous, mutinous, stiff-necked, rebellious rabble-rouser. This deserves some more attention, so we will circle around and come back to that later on.

5. Newton lived aboard the naval ship for a time but was eventually was put out of his service and began sailing on a trading vessel bound for Sierra Leone, West Africa where he had high hopes of getting rich through the slave trade. But in a twist of providence he ended up becoming a virtual slave himself for well over a year (explain). One of his biographers notes that,

The time he spent...in captivity was the lowest period of Newton’s life. Starving, shackled in fetters, and deeply depressed, he became the object of pity even to his fellow slaves. He lost his fiery anger that had kept him going even in the worst moments [aboard ship]. In his own words, ‘My spirits were sunk. I lost all resolution and almost all reflection.’²

He was 21 years old.

6. By the mercy of God a ship eventually arrived by which he was rescued and offered the opportunity to partner with others who were becoming rich through the slave market. Eventually, another ship captained by a friend of Newton’s father, found him and persuaded to return to England by a fabricated story about the family inheritance that was waiting for him to claim back home. Newton took the bait, quit his business, and boarded the ship.

7. Then, as they sailed homeward a storm hit the ship and batter her so badly that it almost sank her. But it was in that moment that God miraculously broke his heart of stone and transformed Newton’s life by the shear power of His sovereign grace.

8. Upon arriving home he discovered that the promised inheritance was lie. But a wealthy business man made him captain of one of his ships. The vessel was named the Brownlow, and it had been constructed for one purpose, to transport human souls for sale in the slave trade.

² Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*, (Crossway, 2007), 59

9. With his career secured, he returned to the Catlett home and asked for Mary's hand in marriage. She accepted, her father approved, and they got married. Newton made three voyages back to Africa as a ship's captain. While sailing he used the long hours of free time to read great works of divinity and taught himself Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and French. Turns out he was a very bright young man. During this time he began to wonder if God could ever use him as a minister of the gospel in service as pastor of a local church.

10. For the time being, however, his plans were to continue sailing. Then, in another surprising twist of providence, he was having tea with his wife, Mary, one afternoon when suddenly he was stricken by a strange seizure that disabled him for about an hour. It was an affliction which, as he later explained, "left me no other sign of life than that of breathing." A doctor came and pronounced him unfit to sail and his career on the high seas was suddenly over.

10. Newton's recovery came as quickly as the seizure and the problem never returned, but it left him unemployed. Eventually, he was offered the lucrative position of Surveyor of Tides which also offered him a significant amount of free time to continue his studies and to travel.

11. As a new believer he had no church, no Christian friends, and had never even heard an evangelical preacher. But then one day he had the opportunity to meet George Whitefield, the greatest preacher and evangelist of his time. Whitefield spent five minutes with him and then offered him a ticket to come hear him preach at a large church the following day. Newton went and upon hearing the great Whitefield preach, his life was forever change.

12. He and Whitefield became close friends, through which God operated to shape Newton's theology. In the years to come he would also have the pleasure of befriending other great men of God such as William Wilberforce, Charles Simeon, Henry Martyn, William Carey, and John Wesley.

13. Newton became a great supporter of dissenting, nonconformist, evangelical churches whose passion for the gospel and holy living made the Anglican church extremely uncomfortable. They constantly derides their "enthusiasm" as they called it. Nevertheless, through a tangled web of events that followed over the next few years, Newton ended up becoming an ordained minister in the Church of England.

14. He pastored two large churches, first in the country village of Olney where he served 16 years. Early in his time at Olney he published his autobiography, *An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the life of ...* It was an instant best-seller which made this young pastor famous throughout the English speaking world. From that time to this his autobiography has never been out of print. It was in Olney that he also wrote the most famous hymn in the western world, *Amazing Grace*.

15. When he was 54 years old he became pastor of an even larger church called St. Mary's Woolnoth, in London where he served another 27 years. Then, on December 21, 1807, Newton died at the age of 82.

16. Now, there is so much we can benefit from in the narrative of John Newton's life, but with the time remaining I would like to focus on just a few insights that I think make Newton's life worthy of imitation.

II. Biblical Insights from Newton's Life:

A. Grace is Greater Than We have Imagined

1. Newton would develop a very robust theological understanding of God's grace over the years, but it all began with his own unexpected salvation. To appreciate this, you really have to understand what a wicked person Newton was before God's grace broke through.
2. When his mother died so did every sanctifying influence upon his life. His father was an unbeliever and so was his new stepmother. Prov. 29:15 warns, "A child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother." I know of no greater example of this than John Newton. Left to follow the impulses of his own heart he turned into a very self-centered, immoral, hooligan even as a boy.
3. At age 18, after he was pressed into service in the British Navy he became worse. His friend and biographer Richard Cecil says,

"The companions he met with here [aboard ship] completed the ruin of his principles." And of himself he 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... my love to Polly (Mary) was now the only restraint I had left."³
4. Newton was a mutinous, rebellious, wretch aboard ship. One time when they came to port he dissented. For that he was caught, clapped in irons, publically stripped and whipt, and degraded in rank. He was so rebellious and incorrigible aboard ship that the captain ended up flagging down a merchant vessel and trading him for some able-bodied men who would take orders.
5. When he was rescued from slavery in Sierra Leone the captain, who was a friend of Newton's father, treated him like a guest rather than a deck hand. But even in this privileged environment his wicked heart held sway. He wrote,

My life, when awake, was a course of most horrid impiety and profaneness. I know not that I have ever met so daring a blasphemer. Not content with horrid oaths and imprecations I daily invented new ones so that I was often seriously reprov'd by the captain.⁴

³ Ibid, 47

⁴ Ibid, 70

5. While aboard the slave ships he would take terrible liberties with the slave women. I mean, this was really a despicable human being. Most of us have probably never known the likes of Him. If there was ever a “hopeless case” it was John Newton. But God...

6. On March 21, 1748, “God acted in a remarkable way. One night aboard ship in the North Atlantic, Newton was awakened by the rush of water into his cabin. The ship had been enveloped by a monster storm. One of its waves struck the boat so hard that a large section of the upper bow was smashed to pieces. The broken planks opened a large hole in the ships side and water began pouring in.⁵ The captain assigned Newton to the pumps which he worked with all his might from 3am till noon, during which time he suddenly declared to his mates, “If this does not do, the Lord have mercy upon us.” As soon as he uttered those words, newton was astonished with himself. He later said, “I was instantly struck by my own words. This was the first desire I breathed for mercy for many years.” John Newton, the “African Blasphemer” had spoken the Lord’s name with respect and reverence for the first time.⁶ And it stunned him.

9. Turn with me to Ephesians 2. Hear the words of the apostle Paul. (Read Eph. 2:1-10)

10. This is what God did in the life of John Newton. As with the thief on the cross facing death, the Lord ignited a marvelous work in what he would ever-after call the “the great day of turning.”⁷

9. When Newton later penned the words of his famous hymn, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...” he was not using hyperbole to describe himself. He really was a wretched human being! But one day God broke in and gave life to his dead heart, and in a moment his soul became alive to God no less than Lazarus who arose from the tomb.

10. But this wasn’t the only reason Newton thought grace was amazing. You see, we don’t fully understand grace if we think of it merely as a benevolent act of God by which he expunges our record of sin. In the Bible grace is not meant to be thought of as an impersonal work of God. Rather, grace is to be view as the personal presence of God in Christ.

11. When Newton speaks of grace he is speaking of the powerful union between Christ and the believer. Man’s problem isn’t merely that we have offended God by our sin, but that we are separated from the divine life of God because of our sin. We are like broken branches, withered and fruitless, separated from God. Newton explains,

But grace, through faith unites us to Christ the Living Vine, from whom, as the root of all fullness, a constant supply of sap and influence is derived into each of

⁵ Aitken, 75

⁶ Ibid, 76

⁷ Tony Reinke, *Newton on the Christian Life*, (Crossway, 2015), 35

his... branches, enabling them to bring forth fruit unto God, and to persevere and abound therein.” “A life of union with Christ is the life of grace.”

12. Too often we think of grace as some kind of benevolent force or action by which God is kind or nice to us. In reality, grace is God uniting us to His Son in an inseparable union.

13. Turn to Titus 2:11. “For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all men...” What does he mean by the “grace of God” here? Is he not speak of Jesus? Is He not speaking of the Living Vine who gives life to those who are DEAD in their sin?

14. Some of you hearing my voice right now have a low view of your sin. You think your sins are small and insignificant. Let me say this to you with the love and compassion of Christ; that if you think your sins do not matter to God you may not have the life of Christ in you. That is to say, you have yet to receive and embrace God’s grace savingly. I plead with you to repent and believe.

15. For Newton, God’s saving grace was not a thing, or a force, or even an action. It was the person of Jesus. It was the same Person whom the apostle Paul said (1 Cor. 1:30) “became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.”

16. Beloved, the grace of God is more robust than you may think. The grace of God is none other than the Person of God united with the child of God in Jesus Christ. That’s why its an all-sufficient grace to meet us at our every need. As Newton put it,

The great God is pleased to manifest himself in Christ, as the God of grace. This grace is manifold, pardoning, converting, restoring, persevering grace, bestowed upon the miserable and the worthless.

17. This is the robust grace of John Newton. And for the remainder of his life he never failed commemorate March 21, that Great Day of Turning.” The day God’s grace broke through. When He was eighty years old he wrote, “March 21, 1805. Not well able to write. But I endeavor to observe the return of this day with Humiliation, Prayer, and Praise.” He had marked the day as sacred and precious for over half a century.⁸

18. Grace is Greater than You May Think.

B. Grace Produced Profound Spiritual Health and Joy

1. By health I am speaking specifically of mental or spiritual health. After His salvation there was really a remarkable change in this man’s life. He went from being the angry “African Blasphemer” to, by some accounts, one of the “healthiest and happiest pastors in England.”⁹

2. Let me just give you a sample of how his change of perspective on life. He once wrote,

⁸ Piper, *Roots...*, 48

⁹ John Piper, *Insanity and Spiritual Songs in the Soul of a Saint*, (audio message), www.desiringgod.org/messages/insanity-and-spiritual-songs-in-the-soul-of-a-saint

Two heaps of human happiness and misery; now if I can take but the smallest bit from one heap and add to the other, I carry a point. If, as I go home, a child has dropped a halfpenny, and if, by giving it another, I can wipe away its tears, I feel I have done something. I should be glad to do greater things, but I will not neglect this.¹⁰

3. Again, (and this is convicting to pastors like me who sometimes get frustrated at all the interruptions to my study), Newton writes,

When I hear a knock on my study door, I hear a message from God; it may be a lesson of instruction, perhaps a lesson of penitence; but, since it is his message, it must be interesting.

4. This is what made Newton's ministry stand out in his day. Grace (i.e. the Life of Christ) caused him to see the goodness of God in everything and it caused Him to love people. And other example of this is the fact that when he started his ministry in Olney one of the first things he did was to start a children's ministry for the community. The people he served were mostly poor lace makers whose children received very little education and he was determined to reach them with the gospel. On the first day 89 children showed up. Those children had such a good time that they apparently told their friends and on the second day 44 more arrived. Soon there were over 200 children showing up on the church grounds. He loved children. You have got to have some serious spiritual health to minister 40 children, let alone 200!

5. I'm not sure how he did it! His biographer says he was a most effective communicator to the young. He told them Bible Stories, wrote poems for them, and made them learn hymns by heart. He even preached to them the parables of Jesus.¹¹

6. In addition to that he would preach 6 times per week. And just as a side note, His Sunday sermons typically lasted a full hour (thank you very much). He even gave explanation for that length. He said, "I cannot wind up my ends to my own satisfaction in a much shorter time, nor am I please with myself if I exceed it."¹²

7. This extraordinary spiritual health and joy was also manifest in hymn writing. He wanted to teach his people doctrine who he set out, with the help of his friend, William Cowper, to produce a hymnal for their church. Cowper wrote 67 hymns and Newton wrote 281, including Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken, How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds, and Faith's Review and Expectation which today you all know as Amazing Grace.

8. So the grace of God produce within him a tremendous spiritual health and joy.

¹⁰ Piper, *Insanity and Spiritual...*

¹¹ Aiken, 188

¹² Ibid, 186

C. Grace Enabled Him to see God's Providence:

1. After his salvation Newton became especially attuned to the workings of God's invisible hand of providence in his life.

- A. Meeting Mary (Polly) and then marrying her.
- B. The rescue from the island of slavery
- C. In the sinking ship when the captain sent him back for a knife and the other man was swept away.
- D. Another captain inexplicably removed him from his usual position in the provision boat. All were lost.
- E. The epileptic seizure

2. Puritan pastor, John Flavel, once wrote,

O what a history might we compile of our own experiences [if] with a melting heart we trace the footsteps of Providence all along the way it has led us to this day! Here it prevented, and there it delivered. Here it directed, and there it corrected. In this it grieved, and in that it relieved. Here was the poison, and there the antidote. This providence raised a dismal cloud, and that dispelled it again. This straitened, and that enlarged. Here a want, and there a supply. This relationship withered, and that springing up in its [place]. Words cannot express the high delights and gratifications a gracious heart may find in such employment as this.”¹³

3. Grace Enable Newton to see God's Providence.

D. Grace Drove Him into Personal Ministry:

1. Too many young men who enter the ministry bring with them the mistaken notion that pastoral ministry is only about preaching. To be sure, it is not less than preaching, but it is much. Being a shepherd means not only preaching to large crowds on Sunday's but meeting with people one-on-one to shepherd them through difficulties, conflicts and fears. Newton is a surprising example of such ministry.

2. Let there be no mistake, Newton was a preacher and people loved to hear him preach. We know that because of the crowds of people who came to hear him. This it was true in Olney, and it was true in London where so many people were coming that they had to expand the building to accommodate. But Newton never let that distract him from the personal ministry of discipleship and biblical counseling.

¹³ John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence*, (Ichthus Publications, 2014), 6

3. One biographer noted that “Whatever he said in the pulpit, Newton reinforced by one on one conversations... He emphasized his determination to ‘converse singly’ with individuals for an hour at a time, keeping a careful record of these appointments. He also offered spiritual counsel to several parishioners each week in his vicarage study.”¹⁴ Beloved, that’s what shepherds do. You may call it discipleship, or biblical counseling, or personal ministry but its all the same. It involves helping people with their perplexing difficulties and practical problems of life by bringing God’s word to bear on them in love.
4. Newton did a lot of this ministry. He did much of it in his office, but he also a very effective counselor by letter. This is a happy providence for everyone who wants to become an effective counselor. We don’t have to wonder what Newton would have said about anger, or anxiety, or disappointment, or suffering. We know exactly what he would have said because he said it in so many letters.
5. In fact, aside from his song, Amazing Grace, his greatest legacy to future generations was his letters. Five hundred of them were preserved and published before his death and another five hundred after his death.
6. Let me offer just a sample of one or two.

Regarding the problem of disappointment he wrote to one brother,

“I can hardly recollect a single plan of mine, of which I have not since seen reason to be satisfied, that had it taken place in season and circumstance just as I proposed, it would, humanly speaking, have proved my ruin; or at least it would have deprived me of the greater good the Lord had designed for me. We judge things by their present appearance, but the Lord sees them in their [outcome]. If we could [see everything as He does, we would have the mind of God]; but as we cannot, it is [therefore] an unspeakable mercy that he will manage for us, whether we are pleased with His management or not...

Indeed we [should] admire His patience toward us. If we were blind, and reduced to [needing] a person to lead us [around], and should yet... dispute with him, and direct him at every step, we should probably soon weary him, and provoke him to leave us to find the way by ourselves if we could. But our gracious Lord is long-suffering and full of compassion; He bears with out [complaining], yet He will take methods to both shame and to humble us, and to bring us to a confession that He is wiser than we. The great and unexpected benefits He intends for us, by all the disciplines we meet with, is to tread down our wills, and bring them into subjection to His. So far as we attain this, we are out of reach of disappointments; for when the will of God can please us, we shall be pleased every day, and from morning till night.”

Regarding fears and anxieties, he wrote, Dear Madam,

¹⁴ Aitken, 187

“I compare the troubles which we have to undergo in the course of the year to a great bundle of [sticks], far too large for us to lift. But God does not require us to carry the whole at once. He mercifully unties the bundle, and gives us first one stick, which we are to carry today, and then another, which we are to carry tomorrow, and so on. This we might easily manage, if we would only take the burden appointed for each day; but we choose to increase our troubles by carrying yesterday’s sticks over again today, and adding tomorrow’s burden to the load, before we are required to bear it.”

7. You can imagine the amount of time Newton put into each of these letters and how helpful and encouraging they must have been. Each of the biographers I have read agrees that the reason his people were so devoted to him was not because of his fame or his great preaching but because they knew he loved them and went out of his way to help them with every trial (e.g. William Cowper).

8. So grace drove Newton into personal ministry.

E. Grace Produced in Him a Deep Humility.

1. James teaches us (James 4:6) that “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Like John the Baptist who said, “Christ must increase but I must decrease” so Newton endeavored to lift up Christ and lower himself.

2. It was his opinion that the greatest virtue in a minister was his humility. He wrote,

Lord, give me a humbling sense of my sins, give me a humbling view of thy glory, give me a humbling view of thy love, for surely nothing humbles me like these. All my pride springs from ignorance... May I be nothing in my own eyes, may I be willing a desirous to be the servant of all.¹⁵

3. A text that seemed to govern his life and produce much gentleness in his ministry was 2 Tim. 2:24-26

The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged,²⁵ with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth,²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.

4. At the end of the day, the thing that perplexed John Newton more than anything was NOT that some people could not grasp Reformed teaching or that or that they repeatedly stumbled into patterns of sin. What really astounded him was the thought that, after all those years of living as the “African Blasphemer,” God has been gracious to him, had

¹⁵ Aitken, 149

forgiven his sin, and had promised him an everlasting audience with Jesus in heaven. In his own words,

“When I get to heaven, I shall see three wonders there. The first will be to see many there whom I did not expect to see; the second wonder will be to miss many people who I did expect to see; the third and greatest of all will be to find myself there.”¹⁶

5. In one of his final hymns he penned these words,

My grace would soon exhausted be,
But His is boundless as the sea;
Then let me boast with holy Paul,
That I am nothing, Christ is all.¹⁷

6. At age 82 shortly before he died, John Newton famously said, “My memory is gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.”

So beloved, here is a man whose life and character help us see how to live out the biblical truths we know and love. To the extent that we see Christ in him, we are helped along in our sanctification by his life. So, as the author of Hebrews would say, *Consider the result of his conduct and imitate his faith.*

¹⁶ The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations, (Baker books, 2000), 470

¹⁷ Reinke, 44