

# Amazing Grace: Life of John Newton, Author of the Hymn, and Object of the same Grace

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While God is pleased in his covenant mercies most often to gather his Church from the children of believing parents and in ongoing Christian nurture and development, there are notable exceptions. Among you there are probably some exceptions and there have been throughout history. Already in the Old Testament we find examples of God reaching down, as it were, to pluck a brand out of the fire, to use the language of Zechariah three verse two. We see it in Rahab, Joshua chapters two and six as referred to in Hebrews 11 verse 31. We see it in God's salvation of Ruth the Moabitess.

And so the Lord began to teach his people, as we read in Psalm 87 of the glorious things that would be spoken of the city of God and of God gathering his Church from the nations and from those whom you and I would never choose.

The same is found in God's salvation of Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of the Church whom God would make an apostle to the Gentiles.

Another example in Church history is that of Augustine whose life was consumed by ungodliness until God drew him powerfully and irresistibly conquering him by the power of his grace. Now less was that true in the man whose life we consider tonight, John Newton, best known as the author of that well known hymn *Amazing Grace*.

Later in his life, John Newton was fond to point to himself as an illustration of the truth that God's grace shows that no case is too hard for his power and no case too low and miserable for his compassion.

It is my privilege to introduce you to Newton's life while also calling your attention to the doctrines of grace that embraced his life and which must also embrace your life and mine.

Those doctrines of grace—also known since the time of the reformation as the five points of Calvinism—were not merely intellectual points of knowledge and teaching for John Newton. They were his life. They touched every fiber of his being because in his words, "The doctrines of grace are doctrines according to godliness."

Please bear in mind that I can only call attention this evening to some of the highlights in Newton's life. His life is well documented, especially from his own letters and diaries. There have also been full length biographies written about him, including more recently the well written book by Jonathan Aitken entitled, *John Newton from Disgrace to Amazing Grace*.

My speech only gives an overview. But consider with me the life of John Newton.

And we begin with his childhood. God gave John Newton a long life on this earth, especially in the era in which he lived. Born in London in the 24<sup>th</sup> of July, 1725 he died on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December, 1807 having walked this earthly sojourn for more than 82 years.

John Newton, named after his father, was born to a mixed marriage. That is, his mother Elizabeth was a Christian, but his father was not. John Newton himself described his father with respect, noting that he was a moral man as the world reads morality. He was a man of remarkably good sense. John Newton, Sr., had been educated, in fact, at a Jesuit, a Roman Catholic college near Seville in Spain. But even while marrying a Christian woman, he apparently never came to a true and living faith himself.

John Newton's own testimony of his mother, on the other hand, was, "That she made it the chief pleasure and business of her life to instruct me and bring me up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

That is a powerful testimony to a Christian mother.

I do well to pause and ask those of you to whom God has given children: Will your children be able to give the same testimony of you?

Newton was later told that not only did his mother long for a sound education for him, she longed for him to be a minister some day. Before he reached five years of age she taught him the answers to the Westminster Shorter Catechism with the proof texts.

Obviously, the young Newton had a retentive memory. But in God's sovereign appointment, who has marked out all our days, John Newton's mother died before he reached the age of seven.

Especially difficult was this loss for young John because his father was a shipmaster often gone from home for long periods of time.

We don't know the mind of the Lord in such matters. We confess with the psalmist in Psalm 18 verse 30, "The way of the Lord is perfect."

And we confess that because God has told us so. And, as the psalmist reminds us in that same verse, "The word of the LORD is tried."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 18:30.

He has not only told us that his way is perfect, he has proven it.

But when we stand before God's sovereign work and ways even in our own lives, we must often remember what we read in Isaiah 55 verses eight and nine.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

Our lives are in the hands of him who is God alone. And God's way with young John was to let him go his own way that he might taste the depths of his own depravity and sin in order that he might experience the wonder, the amazing wonder of the irresistible grace of God who alone can save us.

It would be years later when he would write from his own experience, "We know but little of the extreme malignity of sin, because we have such faint views of the majesty, holiness and greatness of God against whom that sin is committed. And yet a single sin," he wrote, "if clothed with all its aggravations and the guilt of it brought home with power to the heart, is sufficient to make a sinner a terror unto himself."

John Newton would never forget the depths from which God saved him. The fall of John Newton was great.

When his father returned from sea after his mother had died, his father married again. But unlike his mother, his step mother was not a believer and didn't have a biblical understanding of raising children in the fear of the Lord and with godly instruction. Young John was soon left to himself to run wild in the streets. He began to keep bad company. He began to become very profane in his speech. That profanity would continue for many years as he sunk deeper and deeper into the wretchedness of his own depravity. Even then young John could not completely shake off that instruction that his mother had given him.

For a time he zealously read religious books, continued reading his Bible and praying.

When he was 12 years old he fell from his horse and narrowly missed being impaled upon sharp spike. And the realization hit him that he had come inches from death and that moved him to thank God not only, but gave him the recognition that he was in no fit state to meet his maker at the judgment seat.

So for a while he repented and mended his ways. He apparently had the mistaken notion that if only he would do religious things he would regain God's favor. It would take years before he would learn that no outward piety, no religious appearance, no observance of religious ceremonies can substitute for the faith bond with Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 55:8-9.

John Newton had yet to be taught the wonder of salvation by God's sovereign grace and grace alone. So he soon fell back into what he would later call even greater depths of wickedness.

And that brings us to the second main period of John Newton's life, his life at sea.

Growing up in a maritime community, given his father's occupation, it was quite natural that young John would also take up that occupation. His life at sea proved to be a hard life made all the more difficult because of his own impetuous and incorrigible behavior. Not only did he join with his hardened shipmates drinking and blaspheming with the worst of them, but he showed himself very ill tempered and irresponsible.

While given various opportunities for noteworthy positions because of his own father's reputation, John proved to be a disappointment to his father and a nightmare to those who employed him.

In the spring of 1744 just before his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, he failed to show up for a job appointment because of his romantic pursuits of a girl named Polly Catlett. While visiting her family in Chatham, he was out for a walk when he came face to face with a pressgang.

Now a pressgang was a name given to naval platoons who were sent out from their ships to seize or impress men for service in the British naval fleet. And so Newton was taken to serve on the warship *HMS Harwich*. While a capable seaman even at 18 years old, Newton's behavior soon lost him all respect not only among the officers, but even among the sailors.

After two desertions Newton was barely spared being hanged from the yardarm of the ship, instead subjected to a public flogging and stripped of his rank. His life continued in a tailspin.

Not long after, John together with another sailor was exchanged for two seamen from a merchant ship. That led young Newton on another pathway, to the coast of West Africa and to his participation in slave trafficking.

As a 20 year old, John Newton had no scruples about profiteering in this horrific practice. The ways of God with him also in this aspect of his life go beyond our human comprehension, because God gave him to see and personally to experience the horror of this abomination by leading him into captivity himself.

Employed by a certain slave trader named Clough, Newton soon found himself in Clough's bondage, made a slave himself. He was put into irons, treated more brutally than the other slaves so that even the Africans could not comprehend the extraordinarily brutal behavior that Newton experienced as a white man from the hands of another white man.

But while God gave him personally to experience the horrors of slavery, when God delivered him from that earthly bondage, Newton was still in such spiritual bondage that it seems not to have bothered him at all to participate again in this expression of human depravity and hatred toward another simply because of a person's race and condition.

Those stirrings of the moral horrors of slave trade would not strike him until some 30 years later when he would take up the cause, together with William Wilberforce of seeking the abolition of the slave trade in England.

The way of Newton's deliverance from his own personal bondage to the brutal Clough came nearly a year and a half later when another slave trader came to live on the same island. This man made arrangements for Newton's release to his own employment. And he did so by trading a couple of men for Newton.

This trader that now took Newton under his employment, owned several slave factories along the coast of West Africa. And in his employ, Newton was soon promoted and came to be regarded as a trusted companion by his new employer. Before long, Newton himself was a partner in the trader's factory in Kittim in the coast of today's Sierra Leone. Here he sank only deeper into the bondage of spiritual depravity.

Not only did he grow hardened to the gruesome operations of slave hunting and capturing and destroying families, buying and selling human beings, but he engaged in sexual promiscuity and witchcraft.

It seemed that there was not a God honoring bone left in his body. He denied the very existence of God. And still God did not cast him off.

While Newton was sinking deeper and deeper, God's hand of providence was at work back in England organizing his rescue. While in the captivity of Clough, John Newton had written some letters to his father back in England and had passed them off to traders who had come to do business. John had no way to know if his letters would ever be delivered, but they were.

His father horrified by the cruel conditions his son described sought the help of a prominent ship owner, Joseph Manistee of Liverpool. One of his vessels, the *Greyhound* was about to sail for the coast of Africa. He gave orders to his captain to look for this young John Newton along the coastline of West Africa and to bring him home if he found him.

After making many inquiries about him, the ship's captain, as Newton later would realize, clearly directed by the sovereign hand of God, found Newton. He found him settled in his new life as a rather prominent slave trader. Newton wasn't ready to give up that life now to return to England.

So Captain Swanwick made up a story which persuaded Newton to return. And he offered him free passage in the ship's cabin, freed from any service on board the ship.

And so Newton began his return journey to England. That journey proved to be a long and difficult journey.

Time constraints prevent me from going into this journey in depth, but it began in February 1747. It would last until April 8 the following year. As time passed on this voyage, Newton's personal conduct deteriorated more and more. Besides his vile language which even drew the reproof of Captain Swanwick, Newton began drinking heavily. The militancy of his ungodliness was shocking even to the hardened sailors. And when in the early hours of March 10, 1748 a violent storm tossed sea began to break apart the ship and it appeared that all would be lost at sea, and when most of the provisions were lost, leaving the crew subject to starvation even after weathering the storm, Captain Swanwick decided it was Newton's God mocking profanities that had brought divine wrath upon his ship. He suggested one way to save the ship and its crew would be to throw Newton overboard.

Although there isn't any indication that he actually intended to carry out his threats, young Newton was worried because he made the remark more than once.

But the real cause of Newton's uneasiness about his safety was the thought that what the captain said was true.

Newton said, "I thought it very probably that all that had befallen us was on my account, that I at last was found out by the powerful hand of God and condemned in my own breast."

He began in his own consciousness to stand as a sinner before the holy God. And so we find the next beautiful stage in John Newton's life, a desperate sinner drawn back to Christ.

It was at this time, in the remaining weeks of this journey by ship that Newton began to read from the ship's copy of the King James Bible. This reading, blessed by the Holy Spirit, had a profound effect upon Newton. One turning point was his study of the parable of the prodigal son recorded in Luke chapter 15, a parable that focuses its attention upon the unchangeable love of God for his children.

Newton identified with the wayward son in that parable. And he marveled that forgiveness could be given such a son.

It is likely that he began to think back to the training of his childhood, some of the passages that he memorized from the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Whether it was clear in his own mind or not at this time, it became clear later in his mind. He later found out from the Word of God that God has chosen his sons and daughters before they were even born. And God had chosen him. And Newton lived as if he didn't know his heavenly Father. And he didn't, not consciously, not spiritually.

But when we disown our Father or reject his love for the pleasures of sin, he remains our Father.

Even though Newton had denied his own place as a child of God and had scorned God's fatherhood, yet God maintained his promise faithfully and remained a father. And it was through many chastisements that God was leading him home.

For as we read in Hebrews chapter 12 verse six, first of all:

“For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.”<sup>3</sup>

And then don't forget the conclusion of that passage, Hebrews 12 verse 11:

“Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.”<sup>4</sup>

That fruit was slowly being born in John Newton.

Later, in reflecting upon this wonder of grace in his own life, John Newton penned this last stanza of Olney Hymn number 71 from Ezekiel 36 verses 25 through 28. John Newton expressed this way God's own Word.

From the first breath of life divine  
Down to the last expiring hour,  
The gracious work shall all be mine,  
Begun and ended in my power.

All begins and ends with God himself.

John Newton understood, also, by his own past experience that the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty is difficult for man to accept.

He said, “Undoubtedly the ground of this opposition lies in the pride of the human heart.”

We all like to be as God determining our own way, our own lives, but the Bible so clearly teaches God's absolute sovereignty that any prejudice against the doctrine of election must be the expression of a prejudice against the clear teachings of God's own Word. Not only do we stand before the teaching of Romans nine and Ephesians one, just to mention two examples, but in Acts 13 verse 48 in pointing to the wonder of the salvation of the Gentiles, the apostle puts it this way.

“... and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 12:6.

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 12:11.

Although the gospel strips us of all human glory and exposes the hopelessness of meriting our own salvation, it does show a way of salvation for the vilest of sinners.

The more Newton reflected on God's mercy to repentant sinners, the more he prayed.

"I saw that the Lord has interposed so far to save me," he would write, "Outward circumstances helped in this place to make me more serious and earnest in crying to him who alone could relieve me."

When Newton set foot on Irish soil he realized that he had also stepped on the path to spiritual life. he began to attend church regularly, faithfully attended to his own private devotions, professed his faith in a church at Londonderry. He also reestablished his relationship with Polly Catlett and began making preparations for marriage.

But his spiritual development had only just begun. True conversion, after all, is not a one time event. One of the reformed creeds, the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 33, in unfolding the teachings of Ephesians four and Colossians three and elsewhere, speaks of true conversion as the continual aspect of spiritual life involving a daily putting off of the old man of sin and putting on the new man in Christ.

And there was still much to be put off in John Newton's life and much room for growth in that new man.

His marriage to Polly Catlett was a blessing to John Newton. As should be the case in Christian marriage, they grew in faith together. It isn't necessary in this speech to go into Newton's continued time in the slave trade, first as a first mate and then as a captain overseeing several voyages. Let it be sufficient to say that from this point on in Newton's life there was continued growth spiritually. He attempted fervently and consistently to live as a Christian, continued also to grow spiritually as he applied himself in his devotional life.

But one important element missing in Newton's life at this time was consistent instruction and the joy of fellowship in Christ's Church.

No Christian can continue to live a healthy spiritual life while separating himself from the gathering of believers and particularly from the faithful preaching which God has ordained for his people.

During this aspect of Newton's life God brought him into fellowship with another believer whose occupation as a ship's captain was only secondary to his membership in a chapel in London.

Alexander Clooney contributed greatly to Newton's spiritual growth, rooting him in biblical teaching and in reformed theology.

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<sup>5</sup> Acts 13:48.

Newton wrote of his enthusiasm for his instruction received from his friend, “Now I began to understand the security of the covenant of grace and to expect to be preserved not by own power and holiness, but by the mighty power and promise of God through faith in an unchangeable Savior.”

John Newton’s spiritual growth was also influenced by his introduction to and subsequent friendship with the traveling preacher George Whitefield. Whitefield and his fellow evangelist John Wesley were both under fire within the established church, the Church of England for their Methodism.

To some at that time, however, Methodism simply meant preaching the Word with evangelical enthusiasm, something which might be desired of all preaching. And initially it appears that this was Newton’s understanding of Methodism as well. The intention of the Methodist was to spread spiritual holiness over the land and within the Church of England emphasizing the influence of the Holy Spirit.

But there were some other elements involved, especially among some of the Methodists, most notably an unbiblical emphasis on extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Soon there was division within the Methodist camp with part of it also showing itself heavily influenced by the Arminianism that had been rejected by reformed churches more than a century before.

Those were red flags to many within the reformed camp of the established Church, strongly influenced by Whitefield. John Newton began calling himself a Methodist.

When eventually he had a great desire to pursue the ministry, another friend, the reverend Henry Crook suggested that Newton become an ordained minister within the established church. Crook, a minister in the established church had himself been heavily involved in Methodism, but concerned about the growing gulf between the Methodists and the Church of England, he urged Newton to stay with the established church and avoid becoming too enthusiastic about emulating Wesley and Whitefield who themselves were becoming more and more divided.

Newton heeded the wise instruction of his friend.

After several years of study and tortuous waiting for God to open the door to the ministry, John Newton was ordained in the Church of England on April 29, 1764, just three months short of his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In Olney, a town some 60 miles north of London, the reverend John Newton took up his labors, labors which lasted almost 16 years before his departure to London to serve in another parish.

In Olney Newton became a much beloved pastor and preacher. Much could be noted about this work there and his friendship with the poet William Cowper, but especially notable for his ongoing fame in today's church world was his labors in writing what became known as the Olney hymns including the most famous of them all, *Amazing Grace*.

Newton began writing the Olney hymns in conjunction with William Cowper to use as teaching instruments, especially for the church's children. When he saw how effective the learning of hymns was as a teaching help for children, he began to expand the practice to the adult members of the congregation in the weekly prayer meetings.

These hymns were not used in the worship services of the church, because the church at that time still held to the biblical understanding established by John Calvin that the Psalms are the divinely inspired songbook of the Church for use during divine worship services.

So we recognize the blessing of some hymns that are biblically established while yet preserving the psalms for use in the worship services of the Church. But the Olney hymns became very popular by their use in the prayer meetings and for the instruction of the children.

*Amazing Grace* was written January 1, 1773 while pastor Newton was laboring in his study during the week preparing a sermon based on 1 Chronicles 17 verses 16 and 17.

Those are the opening words of the prayer that David offered to God immediately after Nathan the prophet had proclaimed to him God's promise that he would establish David's throne forever, revealing a divine love that would never be taken away, a promise that pointed to the coming of the Messiah from David's line.

Amazed by that great bestowal of God's grace, David prayed saying,

"Who am I, O LORD God, and what is mine house, that thou hast brought me hitherto? And yet this was a small thing in thine eyes, O God; for thou hast also spoken of thy servant's house for a great while to come, and hast regarded me according to the estate of a man of high degree, O LORD God."<sup>6</sup>

David, you recall, had also suffered from tragic falls into sin and had himself endured a tempestuous journey. He saw himself an unworthy recipient of God's grace, mercy and salvation.

John Newton must have been struck by the parallel between his own life and that of David. He had come to the humbling understanding we needed sovereign, irresistible grace to save us or we would be lost forever. And as he examined his own life, he was overwhelmed by the sovereign embrace of God's love for such a sinful creature.

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Chronicles 16:16-17.

In heartfelt gratitude he began to write that now familiar expression of how the biblical truth of God's sovereign grace had gripped his own soul.

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.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed!

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

We could recite the remaining three stanzas of the song and say much more about Newton's life and ministry, because his ministry continued into the 80<sup>th</sup> year of his life and his life of 82 years lasted almost 35 years after this great song was written. But no greater tribute can be added to any man's life than that he lived as a recipient of God's amazing grace.

For as John Newton said, "Grace is the seed of glory."

The work that God has begun in the objects of his grace is a work that he shall bring to completion, Philippians one verse six.

Is it not clear, then, as John Newton preached, that the doctrine of free, sovereign grace is rather an encouragement to the awakened and broken hearted sinners than otherwise?

"If you are most unworthy of grace," he wrote, "and destitute of every plea, should you not be glad to hear that the Lord does not expect worthiness in those whom he saves, but that he himself has provided the only plea which he will accept and a plea which cannot be overruled, the righteousness and mediation of his well beloved Son. Christ took upon himself the wrath of God that our iniquities deserved. And upon what ground?"

Newton preached, "It was on the ground of his voluntary, substitution for sinners as their covenant head and representative."

He died, therefore, for all those given him by his Father. Hear, then, this glorious gospel, the good news of a powerful Savior for wretched sinners. Come to him. For those who come to him, he shall in no wise cast out.

I thank you for your attention.