

## John Newton And Amazing Grace

John Newton was born in 1726 the only child of Captain Newton who was a master in the Mediterranean merchant trade. While John feared his father who was a harsh and hardened seaman, his Christian mother was gentle and devoted to her son and his religious upbringing. John learned Scripture and hymns as a child until age seven when his mother died. His father on returning from a sea voyage soon married again. John was sent to a harsh boarding school and drifted away from religious thought.

At age eleven he went to sea with his father and shared the captain's cabin but lived in constant fear and dread of his father's wrath. (1) He lived in an environment full of curses and blasphemies and became sullen and introspective. At twelve and again at fifteen he had two near death experiences and his conscience pricked him as to the awful consequence of facing God at death. He wrote: '*I saw the necessity of religion as a means of escaping Hell, but I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it*' (2)

His father found him an apprenticeship with another captain but his rebellious spirit lost him the job and he was soon back with his father. He became a recluse and passed the time at sea reading the Scriptures, praying, fasting and setting penances for past sins. His father despaired of his sons attitude and behaviour.

At age sixteen John read '*Characteristics*' by Lord Shaftesbury. This poisoned his mind to the necessity of saving faith. Shaftesbury's philosophy was that religion was based on nature, man was naturally good and religion was a false view of God. John now saw himself as a 'free thinker' and gave up any religious thoughts and like the rest of the sailors '*learned to curse and blaspheme*'. (3)

At age seventeen his father arranged for John to manage a Jamaican plantation. Before sailing, he was invited to Chatham to stay with the Cartletts, old friends of his mother. There he met their fourteen year old daughter, Mary. He was instantly infatuated with her and was often struck dumb when she entered the same room. He stayed longer than expected and missed his ship to Jamaica. His father was furious and dispatched him on a ship *Dolphin* to Venice with no special privileges but to be as one of the sailors. The ship was like a prison and John wrote: '*I soon...lost all sense of religion...but my regard for her [Mary] was always the same...none of the scenes of misery and wickedness I afterwards experienced ever banished her a single hour together from my waking thoughts for the seven years following.*' (4) When women were smuggled on board for the crew's pleasure, he would escape to the laughter of everyone. (5)

After one year the ship briefly returned to England and he went to see Mary. His father had meantime found another job for John but yet again John delayed and missed the ship. His father was furious and threatened to disown him. (6)

In those days, if required, men were rounded up and impelled to serve in the Navy. Life on Navy ships was far worse than on Merchant vessels. John Newton at this time found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time and was rounded up to serve on *HMS Harwich* with a crew of 350. He found himself amongst hardened condemned criminals who had been given the choice of hanging or serving in the Navy. He suffered the violence of sailors and ill treatment by officers. When his father heard of his son's plight he convinced the captain of *Harwich* to promote John to the quarter deck

as a midshipman. (7) England then declared war on France. John had just one taste of war when they crossed a French *Man of War*. He experienced the guns thundering, the timbers shaking and splintering as the shots crashed into decking. (8)

In 1744 he managed a day's leave and rode to see Mary who was now age fifteen. Her parents were alarmed at the romantic interest shown by Newton. They later banned him from ever seeing or corresponding with her again. (9) When John received news of this, in a state of shock and near madness, he jumped ship and deserted. He was recaptured and returned as a prisoner in irons below deck to await punishment. (10) He developed a hatred for everyone on board. (11)

His punishment was to be flogged before all 350 crew. One young marine fainted as eight dozen strokes with the cat o' nine tails ripped into Newton's body. He held his cries and tried to show no pain but was near unconscious at the last stroke. (12) No one on board was allowed to communicate with him. (13) Newton despaired of ever seeing Mary again: '*My breast was filled with the most excruciating passions; eager desire, bitter rage and black despair...inward or outward I could perceive nothing but darkness and misery...*' (14)

Nineteen days later they encountered a Guinea merchant ship. The *Harwich* captain requested an exchange of two of his least men for two experienced seaman from the merchant ship. Newton pleaded to be exchanged to escape five hard years on the Navy ship. The captain agreed and John felt a newfound freedom amidst a new crew who did not know his past. He soon became known as a foul mouthed insubordinate and irreligious person. He wrote: '*I made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion.*' (15)

This new ship was engaged in a slave trade between Africa and the West Indies. Newton made the friendship of, and was impressed by, an Amos Clow, a wealthy self made slave trader. John followed him and his black mistress to an island off the coast of Guinea and Clow set Newton to work without pay building a house.

While Clow was away collecting slaves Newton contracted a fever and Clow's mistress left him to die. (16) Newton went hungry and sometimes crawled outside to eat grass roots. (17) Had the nearby chained slaves not given him some food he would have died.

More trouble was to come. A rival trader told Clow that Newton was stealing from him. Newton was then chained whenever Clow left camp. For days on end Newton endured the harsh elements and had little water. (18) Newton would have again starved had he not been able to catch a few fish. (19) The isolation nearly broke him. He now worked for Clow more as a slave than as a co-worker. He became very depressed to '*a degree beyond common wretchedness*'. (20) Clow finally released Newton to a new master.

During this time Newton had become interested in African superstitions. He saw himself as being in Satan's service and when he survived an attack by a lioness and an Adder coiled in his pallet he considered this as superstitious 'luck'. (21) By age 22 he had taken on many pagan elements of the culture with its fetishes, taboos, charms and divinations.

In 1747 his father sent men from a ship ashore to look for John. On finding him the men told him the lie that a relative had left him 400 pounds per year. Newton believed them and left with them on the ship '*Greyhound*' for a twelve month

voyage back to England via Brazil and Newfoundland. John had no work on the boat and so engaged in drinking orgies with the crew. He nearly died once when he jumped overboard to rescue his hat. (22) He invented new forms of blasphemy against God. *'My whole life, when awake, was a course of most horrid impiety and profaneness. I know not that I have ever since met so daring a blasphemer...I invented new ones.'* (23)

After nine days at sea Newton picked up a copy of Thomas Kempis *'The Imitation of Christ'*. The book made mention of giving an account on death and this caused Newton to question: *'What if these things be true'*. (24)

On 10th March 1748 the ship was suddenly jolted awake by a violent storm. Waves smashed the sides, tore the rigging and filled the hold with water beyond that which the pumps could handle. Newton and the crew bailed for their lives. All the livestock, much of the cargo and some of the crew were washed overboard. At dawn the wind somewhat abated but the ship seemed to be foundering. At nine o'clock Newton stopped, and exhausted from labour and cold, he spoke these words: *'If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us...'* (25) Newton was struck with his own words and questioned why he said them. His memory began recalling Scriptures from childhood. (26) He tentatively began to pray and search for evidence of God and faith. (27)

Miraculously the ship remained afloat but badly battered and with only seven days food left. On the sixth day they thought they sighted land and broke out the food and drinks and celebrated. But it turned out to be a sighting of clouds. Then another gale hit...

The crew were reduced to thoughts of starving or feeding on one another. (28) They believed Newton was as a Jonah and that this blasphemer had caused their terrible luck. Some demanded he be thrown overboard. Even Newton himself began to believe he was the cause. Little did they realise that from the moment Newton had prayed in the storm he had stopped swearing. (29)

After a month of drifting they made landfall at Northern Ireland. Two hours later a violent storm arose and the crew knew that they would not have survived any longer. Newton reflected long and hard. He could see no reason why God had singled him out to see the hand of God and his mercy. (30) *'I stood in need of an almighty Saviour...the Lord had wrought a marvellous thing: I was no longer an infidel. I heartily renounced my former profanity...I was so sorry for my past misspent life, and purposed an immediate reformation. I was freed from the habit of swearing...I was a new man...I sensed my more enormous sins...I no more questioned the truth of Scripture...but I cannot consider myself to have been a believer in the full sense of the word till a considerable time afterward.'* (31)

He wrote to his father about his experiences and also about his love for Mary. His father thought he had been lost and was so moved that he went to Mary's parents to petition on John's behalf. (32)

Newton met Mary but again was so shy and tongue tied that he could not speak or hardly look at Mary to propose marriage. Mary was disappointed. John left for Liverpool and a new ship, distressed by his performance. He wrote to her expressing his inabilities and feelings. Mary only wrote back once but stated she was willing to wait for him. (33)

Except for the profanities, Newton fell back into his old lusts and ways. (34) But after going down with fever he cast

himself upon the Lord as never before. As he lay prostrate he began to think on Calvary and his sin that necessitated Christ's death. (35) Newton suddenly realised he could not appease God by his methods and legalistic efforts. A peace and health was restored to him over the next few days and he wrote: *'I mark that day as the turning point...I came to the good of being delivered from the power and domination of sin...'* (36) In the days to come Newton was aware of the hand of God when he escaped death several times. Once he was leaving on a long boat to get ashore to get water when the captain called him back and replaced him. The boat sank in the river and all hands were lost except one. Newton had never learned to swim. (37)

Newton returned to Mary and again attempted to propose marriage but was hard pressed to utter the necessary words. When he fumbled the words, Mary answered no, mentioning that he was too good for her. Subsequently, three times he attempted to propose and finally Newton felt a release to speak of his passionate love for her. She gave her consent. A fortnight later they were married in February 1750. Six months later he set sail as the Captain of the *Duke of Argyle*.

Newton had been used to gambling but ceased it on this trip when he realised the money he was losing to support Mary. (38) Although mail was very unreliable, He wrote to Mary every day and every letter arrived.

He began to write against the 'free thinkers'. He prayed that God might give him a better occupation than Slave trading, although it was then considered a respectable trade.

When Newton arrived back in London in November 1751 half of his crew had died. He was given the captaincy of the *African* in 1752 and had a troublesome voyage with mutinies and much death amongst slaves. When he did not hear from Mary he feared she had died and his health deteriorated badly.

He sailed one more voyage and on board was a young man he had sailed with before and who he had turned into an ardent infidel. He set about to see his conversion, but the man was so depraved Newton had him transferred to another ship and the man died a dreadful death soon after. But on one layover in the West Indies he met another Christian, Captain Clunie. Until then Newton had been self taught and was confused in some areas. *'For nearly a month we spent every evening together on board each other's ship alternatively, and often prolonged our visits till towards daybreak...his teaching warmed my heart...I began to understand the...covenant of grace, and to expect to be preserved...'* (39)

When he suffered a mysterious seizure he resigned his commission and never went to sea again. He began attending church but was often disappointed by what he heard. He resolved to sleep no more than seven hours and have devotions for at least one hour before breakfast. (40) He heard George Whitefield preach several days in a row. But when Newton attempted to speak publicly or privately with others he was tongue tied.

In August 1755 Newton got a job as a Tide Surveyor in Liverpool. For some of the time he was involved in the common practise of smuggling until he confessed the sin of the love of money.

Newton once had to leave Mary for five months when she became sick. During this time away from Mary his letters showed the deep love he had for his wife. Newton once confessed to God his 'idolatry' of her. Later, after 25 years of marriage, he wrote to Mary (who was away): *'My love was grown pretty tall when I married you, and it has been*

growing every day since. It was once an acorn but has now spreading branches and a deep root like an old oak.' (41)

He wrote to her every day when away. His letters were later published as *'Letters To a Wife'* and they show his passionate love affair with his wife till death.

In 1755 Newton heard George Whitefield preach again at a 5am meeting to 4,000 people. He managed to talk with George for two hours and Whitefield had him for supper.

Newton was busy teaching himself Greek and Hebrew but he stopped after a time and began writing tracts and short essays on the need for men and woman to face their need of the Saviour. England too was in the grip of the 'Great Awakening'.

Newton first preached in a congregational church but it was deemed a 'disaster'. But he still maintained the idea of the ordained ministry. He approached the Church of England but no one would vouch for him and he had no formal training. After many knockbacks he was eventually offered a Curacy in Buckinghamshire. At age 39 he was ordained. He was not a profound thinker; his sermons were down to earth expositions of favourite passages.

Newton was famous for his prolific letter writing on nearly ever topic. On election and perseverance he wrote: *'As the doctrines of election and perseverance are comfortable, so they cut off all pretence of boasting and self dependance when they are truly received in the heart, and therefore tend to exalt the Saviour. Of course they stain the pride of all human glory, and leave us nothing to glory in but the Lord. The more we are convinced of our utter depravity and inability from first to last, the more excellent Jesus will appear...'* (45) Like most of the leaders of his day, Newton was an 'avowed Calvinist'. But he accepted many others of differing persuasions. He corresponded equally with Whitefield and Wesley alike.

He ministered to the poor people in Olney where the congregation numbered about 2,000. He became famous for his tales of the sea and his ministry to children. Newton also teamed with a William Cowper in song writing.

In 1776 Newton developed a large tumour in his thigh which caused him considerable pain. No sooner did he recover the year after, a fire broke out and destroyed much of Olney. Newton raised large sums of money for the victims.

Opposition to Newton began to grow in Olney and his popularity began to wane. In 1779 he left Olney at age 54 and moved to St Mary's Woolnoth London. This church was a mixed congregation of various doctrines and walks of life. But he gave glory to God *'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 eventually be appointed minister of the parish of the first magistrate of the first city of the world...this is a fact that I marvel in...'* (42)

People came to see him from everywhere. He once said *'a knock on my study door is a message from God'* (43) The parliamentarian William Wilberforce requested a meeting with Newton and John shared the Scriptures with him. Wilberforce was greatly impressed and began to look to God and became convinced that the Slave Trade must be stopped. In May 1787 twelve men formed a society for the *'Abolition of Slavery'*. Wilberforce championed the cause and Newton put pen to paper confessing the part he had played in this *'so iniquitous, so cruel, so oppressive, so destructive African slave trade'*. (44) Finally in 1804 parliament banned slavery.

Newton was also a member of the *Church Missionary Society* and became greatly concerned for the welfare of the natives in other lands.

In the Autumn of 1788 Mary developed breast cancer. The tumour grew to the size of a melon. (46) For 12 months she lay in bed and Newton agonised over her constant pain. He admitted he had an *'inordinate affection'* for her over 46 years and again, Newton handed over his 'idol' to God. She died on 15th Dec. 1790. Newton was devastated but continued in preaching saying, *'Dr. Pulpit is my best physician'* (47) *'I, as a sinner, had no rights, and I, as a believer, could have no reason to complain. He had loaned her to me, and He who loaned her had a right to take her back when He chose...'* (48)

In 1799 Newton received an honorary doctorate but refused to accept the title of DD after his name.

Earlier in Olney, the Newtons had adopted the daughter of a brother in law, Betsy, who became precious to John. In 1801 Betsy suffered a breakdown and was consigned to an asylum. Newton accepted the will of the Lord and thanked him for her ten years with him. Betsy later recovered and happily married.

Newton preached into his eighties and became mostly blind. In 1806 he mounted the pulpit for the last time and forgot what he was to preach on. He died on 21st December 1807 at the age of 82.

His famous hymn describes his life: *'Amazing Grace!'*

#### **Terry Arnold**

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