

Grace for a Wretch Like John Newton

It must have been cold in John Newton's study as he prepared his sermon during the last week of December 1773. From his second-floor retreat, Newton could see the church at Olney, England, where he would preach on New Years' Day, just as he did every Sunday. His habit was to write a hymn to correspond with the sermon each week as way to help his mostly-illiterate congregation review the Bible lesson. The text for this week was I Chronicles 17.

And David the king came and sat before the LORD, and said, "Who am I, O LORD God, and what is mine house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?"

In meditating on his text, the forty-eight-year-old Newton surely asked along with King David, "Who am *I* that you have brought *me* here?"



As a young man, John Newton was a sailor, like his father before him. He went to sea for the first time on his father's ship when he was just 11 years old. By the time John was 17, his father was ready to retire from the sea-faring life and anxious to see his son in a good position, but John didn't fit easily into the discipline his vocation required. He was sometimes days late in reporting for duty. He created bawdy and disrespectful songs and taught them to his shipmates. He drank too much and boasted. He deserted his ship and generally caused so much trouble that one captain traded him to another ship in mid-voyage, just to be rid of him.

In 1748 John stopped sailing for two years and went into the African slave-selling business with a man named Clow. Together they took longboats into the interior and paid natives to capture men, women and children. Newton and Clow transported these victims to the coast, where they were sold at great profit to waiting slave ships. It was a dangerous business, and soon Newton contracted malaria in the swampy inland. Clow and his wife seized this opportunity to abuse and enslave Newton, starving him and leaving him bound and exposed to the elements for days at a time. Even the black slaves on the island where he was held took pity on Newton and sometimes shared their food with him. Newton, however, did not return the slaves' compassion for the helpless until much later in his life.

Some associates of Newton's father intervened and helped gain his release from Clow. Newton immediately sailed back to England on a merchant ship. On his next voyage, Newton was the mate on a slave ship headed to Africa. After learning the trade, Newton became the captain of his own slave ship and spent the next seven years transporting kidnapped men, women, and children from Africa to England. He later said that at the time, he never questioned the morality of this form of commerce. His conscience was clear, though he eventually came to see slavery as corrupt and worked in the British Abolition movement.

It's hard to pinpoint when Newton met Christ. According to his own testimony, he "took up and laid down his religious profession" regularly during his sea-faring years, usually taking it up after a brush with death and gradually letting go over the course of his months at sea.

Nonetheless, gradually and certainly a change was noticed in the life of John Newton. First he quit blaspheming, gambling, and drinking and spent hours in Bible study and prayer. Later he instituted Sunday worship services on his ship. He resisted the common temptation to take advantage of the women slaves under his control and he forbade his crew from abusing them. On one trip to Africa, he made peace with the woman who mistreated and enslaved him during his illness, and on another trip he tried to mentor a sailor he had led astray many years earlier. Grace had found John Newton.

After retiring from the sea for medical reasons, Newton spent a few years working for the government, and then was ordained into the ministry in 1764. Nearly ten years later, as the much older and wiser Newton reflected on his life in his chilly study, he penned the following lines:

Amazing grace! (How sweet the sound)
That sav'd 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 reliev'd;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believ'd!

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

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.

Shortly before Newton died in 1807, he said:

My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.

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