

# Hardened sailor to humbled servant

John Newton's incredible story of Amazing Grace

I picked up a book over the summer, *John Newton, from disgrace to amazing grace* by Jonathan Aitken, and threw it in my backpack. It was August 13<sup>th</sup> of this past summer, I had a brand new pair of comfortable hiking boots, the orange backpack my brother had given me for our last hunting trip, all the necessary gear for the four wide open days in front of me, alone, without a destination, loaded down, but free as the Osprey I saw catching the updraft in the summer breezes, to roam, cut through the valleys, drink out of mountain streams, and hangout by lakes. On that august morning shuttle, cutting the smooth waters of Redfish, I only had a general ending point, the scenery of jagged peaks, weathered mountain pines, and a single companion - John Newton.

I didn't know anything about him, you know besides the two obvious facts that everyone knows. First, that he discovered gravity. I couldn't wait to read about the story of the apple falling on his head (it was a little fuzzy), but I was a little nervous about the math and physics. The only other thing I thought I might find out about was how his family developed a favorite treat of mine (that I happened to have in my backpack), that little breaded skin, wrapped around a gelatinous paste ...

There's no better place to read about an adventure than when you're on your own adventure. I couldn't put the book down – it's 3 am, I'm camped at 9,000ft on the shores of Lake Kathryn, I had just watched a mountain goat in the lonely crags that evening, and the biggest set of stars made me feel minuscule in my little tent. I'm hooked on a fascinating adventure at sea, amazing, brutal, spiritual! John Newton the hell-bound, hardened sailor. Profane, so disorderly and irreverent that he was known for his extreme debauchery even among his salty mates. His was just another story of man running as hard as he can away, trying to escape the unrelenting pull of God who wanted to overwhelm him with goodness. He was so disorderly, he was beaten for insubordination. He was so devious, that he taught his companions a song that mocked the captain. He managed to make every captain he served under hate him, and he was often traded to different ships. He bought and sold slaves, and found himself (the white man) sold into slavery). He was so abused as a slave (by a tribal queen) that even the other black slaves of the tribe were agast that a white man should be treated this way, shackled and barefoot in the plantation. The other slaves snuck food and water to him. In a Joseph-like story, Newton eventually becomes his own seafaring captain, plying the African coastline for misfortunate souls.

He was rough and tough, but during all these years there was a God who preserved him, who could deliver more grace than he could ever sin, who had more compassion than Newton had rebellion, and God's love eventually broke him. He fought it tooth and nail, until he realized, he couldn't fight against God, and he surrendered his life. He became a minister, he served four decades in two congregations in England. The hardness turned to humility and softness, in the power that only God can do. JI Packer said this, "Ex slave trader John Newton was the friendliest, wisest, humblest and least pushy of all the 18<sup>th</sup> C. evangelical leaders, and was perhaps the greatest letter writer of all Time" Reinke, 25

As we commemorate the sanctity of life today, there could hardly be a more apt testimony than the one who profited from slavery, who became the one who helped dismantle the system. He got behind William Wilberforce, like the wind that fills the sails and helped drive that movement forward. His spiritual advice and words of wisdom upheld William, backed him with knowledge of scriptural truth,

undergirded the man in the front, and helped him stay the course, when he wanted out. Newton obviously had a deep and most personal interest in the matter and when he spoke in the assembly, his words were like thundering blows on the establishment. It was his personal testimony, powerful and spell binding in the courtroom, riveting in print (which went out to the masses in a little pamphlet under the unpretentious title “thoughts upon the African slave trade”), that cut people’s heart to the core.

After 40 years of humble service, teaching, preaching, traveling, the ordained and faithful minister in the church of England, a man of honor, by then known by many as a humble servant of God, respected with impeccable integrity, had a story like no one else. “I use to be the captain of a slave trading vessel. I bought them with the money out of my purse, and chained them together in the hull of my ship. Those were my men that suppressed the uprisings with brutal methods, and tightened the thumb screws on the most obstinate. I can tell you in vivid detail what happened in the waters of the middle passage.” While he was still alive, but on his deathbed, with no recorded reaction to it, the bill for abolition finally passed the English house of commons.

I’d like to frame the story around a singular lesson. It’s obviously impossible to boil a man’s life down into one, but I do think this hook applies from John Newton’s life. This lesson, applied diligently over the course of a lifetime, will keep the child of God where he belongs: dependent on Jesus, needy for personal compassion, and completely amazed at God. Are you lacking any of those this morning? Here it is: John Newton never forgot the depths of depravity that he was personally saved from. His entire life he always referred to himself as a great sinner. Despite his huge success, his transformation, his great messages as a preacher, a big teaching circuit, growing fame, and his powerful influence on the slave trade... despite all that - he never forgot the depths of carnality from where he [personally] came from. He still struggled deeply against sin. It dwelt in him! He didn’t take God’s mercy and then FORGET where he come from or how powerful the grip of sin still was in his flesh. [Dt 8] These thoughts only grew within him a deeper excitement for glory, and a more determined fervor in God’s earthly work. “I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once use to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.” Throughout his entire ministry he often referred to himself as a chief sinner, and he was AMAZED that God would have saved him. He says, “I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see – amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!”

Let’s go to his deathbed (1807). The great American West is just budding, and an aged man in England is shutting his eyes. He told some visitors, p. 347 “I am packed and sealed and awaiting for the post.” Again, “I am like a person going on a journey in a stagecoach, who expects its arrival every hour and is frequently looking out of the window for it.” And here we have one of the most often quoted lines recorded by a bedside friend (William Jay), “I saw Mr. Newton near the closing scene. He was hardly able to talk; and all I find I had noted down upon my leaving him was this: “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior.”

I’d like to shift into the first person pronoun, to emphasize how personal this needs to be. Should I fail along the way to remember how lost I had been without Jesus, how deep my offence to him was (and unfortunately still is), and should I fail to make that reflection a prominent and periodic spiritual habit, [I’m still saved, I can still tell people what the Bible says] I’ll miss out on a certain humble dependence, a desperate need, and a compelling amazement - that keeps me close to Jesus Christ. Overtime, other things will replace the dependence, and the need, and the amazement of what Jesus once was to me.

This is the foundation rung of our year's theme, *establishing Gospel priorities*. There's no conscious decision for this, but over time Jesus isn't quite as near to me, and that's a result of Jesus being not quite as dear to me. That will be noticed because others around me won't be quite as infected with the power of God as a result of my testimony, but greatest loss of all, is that I won't be quite as amazed at what he did for me. But, in an instant, in personal and heart-searching examination, it all comes flooding back. And we hear Jesus' words to the demon possessed man, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you (Mark 5:19)."

When Jesus entered the house of a Pharisee (Luke 7:47), and reclined at his table, a woman of the city (of ill repute) heard that He was there. She came to Jesus and wept, wiping his feet with her tears and anointing them with perfume. The men snickered because they knew who she was, and Jesus said, "He who is forgiven little, loves little." I just want to counter a single thought, "I was raised in a Christian home, I don't have a testimony like that – what am I suppose to do?" If those are your thoughts, maybe you're still young by age or by faith, don't worry, God has some amazing things to show you about the depths of sin in your heart. That's the relentless lesson of the life of faith: sin, confess, give it to God! If you're still not convinced, make that your gospel priority for 2018, "God show me the depths of my sin!"

He who is saved from much, loves much, and John Newton never forgot what he had been.

## The Sinner breaks

### The Path to Hell

Newton was born in London on July 24, 1725. His father was a sailor, he was gone most of the time, and was known to be strict. His mother, Elizabeth was a good teacher and brought him up with education that rivaled any of the time. He could read by four, and had the Westminster shorter Catechism of 1647 memorized by heart, which he bemoaned made him sedentary and not active or playful. With his mother's sudden death, his father's remarriage and new step children, his life changed drastically. He roamed the salty wharf among pubs and pirates, and it was only a matter of time when the call of the sea would beckon him.

He was immediately a man of trouble, liberal with his mouth, not fond of following orders. It was an unfortunate set of circumstances by which he was press-ganged at 20 years old into military service with the Royal Navy, and since he had fallen in love with a young woman named Polly, he tried to escape, but was captured, lashed and flogged severely with the cat's tail, degraded to the lowest rank, bullied, insulted, and headed out of port for a five year voyage. Being madly in love, so distraught of being taken against his will, he seethed and plotted his captain's murder, and weighed that against suicide. Heading to Africa was a pretty low point, only to get lower. The captain didn't like him the mates didn't either, and so he was traded for another ship. He situation got worse there, but he met a business man off the Guinea Coast (West Africa) who was making his fortune operating a factory (no connection with manufacturing). A factory was a fortified enclosure where slave hunters would bring their collected natives, and sell their goods. Once the humans were sold, the enclosure became a scene of gruesome violence.

The natives who had been sold were separated from their families, stripped naked, branded, fettered, and whipped into submission before being dragged off in terror to the ships that would carry them to the slave markets of the West Indies and America. Newton saw this as his ticket to riches, and begged,

pleaded, connived, and was released from his ship to the Plantane islands off the coast of Sierra Leone. Birthed was his career as a slave trader.

The successes and glories he dreamed of sailed away with his ship. On his little island his fate took yet another turn for the worse. His employer went on a business trip that Newton was suppose to accompany him on, but he ran down with a fever and was left in miserable care with PI, his employer's black mistress that sorely hated him. What was it that made everyone dislike him? She purposefully withheld food and water from him, rarely fed him and mocked his emaciated state. He dug himself outside every night under the cover of darkness to dig up roots which he ate unboiled and unwashed. The vomiting made him a skeleton, and PI's slaves took pity on him and during the night so that their chains could be heard clinking as they brought him the smallest portion of their own meager rations.

When Clow returned the incident was dismissed and it appeared that Newton's situation might finally improve and they sailed together on another inland business trip. It's hard to imagine it getting any worse – but it did yet again! A competitor of his master accused Newton of stealing Clow's property. It was totally false and Newton said, "This was almost the only vice I could not justly be charged with..." 59. He was punished severely, put in chains and chained to the deck, 24 hours a day for the rest of the voyage, in scorching heat, torrential downpours and cold nights. This part Newton said nearly broke him.

Back on the island he was enslaved in irons and treated with as much contempt as any field slave. At first he tried to write letters and slip them to strangers on passing ships, but as the months drew by he lost hope. You can hear his broken spirit now, "When a ship's boat came to the island, shame constrained me to hide myself in the woods from the sight of strangers." Twenty one years old, utterly destitute, planting lime trees in the sand, when Clow and PI taunted him, "Who knows, maybe someday when this tree matures you'll be free." Would you believe that Newton one day returned at the command of his own double masted ship, to the sound of thundering cannons, and ate limes from that very tree.

I'll leave the details of his escape, but I'll add that as soon as he achieved freedom, his carnality significantly increased. He doubled his efforts at a new employer's slave factory, and finally started profiting well from the lucrative trade. Newton was now completely hardened to the brutal trafficking of slaves, capturing, buying and selling. He says he had officially "grown black." His purse expanded quickly, and he specifically notes that his unbridled lusts toward African women in a world that he ruled, had the effect of spinning him out of moral control. That's enough detail for the message. Between the African voodoo, black magic, and uncontrolled behavior, Newton no longer wanted to go home. His father had sent a sailing friend to look for him, and when by sheer happenstance he found Newton on the Island, the young man refused to go home. Newton was tricked by a promise of a great inheritance in going with him. On ship, for the fourth time, Newton somehow was able to make an enemy out of yet another captain. "My life when awake was a course of most horrid impiety and profaneness. I know not that I ever met so daring a blasphemer. Not content with horrid oaths and imprecations, I daily invented new ones, so that I was often seriously reproved by the captain."

And for no reason at all besides boredom, he picked up a book on deck, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas Kempis (a primer for believers, with extensive commentary on Scripture). He was bound by a singular thought, "what if all this was true?" but in frustration he slammed the book shut.

## The Storm that saved him

Early the next morning, the gale of God, brought him back that question. A blood curling cry, “The ship is sinking!” The men lashed themselves to the ship and started pumping - hour after hour. When Newton was so exhausted he was sent to the helm where he again tied himself, and steered the *Greyhound* for 11 hours. It was in those hours that his heart finally broke. There’s no atheists in a foxhole they say. He just began to pray. He’d been so out of habit, he later said it wasn’t a prayer of faith, it was just a cry for physical help “God... mercy!” In the course of that week, John quickly found courage in two passages. 1) The prodigal son (which he immediately related to), and 2) Luke 11:13, “if you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly father give good gifts to those who ask Him.” His conclusion was simply this (83) “If this book is true, the promise is also true. I have need of that very spirit... I must pray for it.”

Although his true conversion was a process that Newton recognized over a course of took years, he does say about his return to London, “To all appearances I was a changed man.” He did what most people do after a crisis, he stopped swearing, started churchgoing, read religious books, took communion and made a vow to be the Lord’s forever.

I will content myself to simply giving bullets of the next six years (1748-1754). The tides of Newton’s career definitely changed.

- He found out that he had been tricked into returning home, and there was no inheritance.
- He reconnected with Polly, whom he had left so many years previously. She was still unmarried, and she became his devoted wife of 40 years. Newton reflected many times, “I feel like I have a spiritual problem of idolatry...”
- Through a series of fortunate events, he found favor again at sea, and rose quickly in the ranks from first mate to eventual sea captain ... of Three different slave trading ships [Brownlow, The Duke of Argyle, The African]

Newton began growing in his relationship with Christ, as he profited and developed his slaving career. From London he would sail on the various ships (through tempests and storms), plying the waters of Western Africa for 8 months, buying slaves, loading up the hulls (2,3,10 at a time), and in his downtime, dreaming of Polly, and retreating to his captain’s quarters to read, pray, and teach himself Greek, Hebrew and Latin.

Immediately we’re morally conflicted. The iron clank of chains below deck, the crack of the whip and the brutality of the deckhands on deck, and a spiritual seeds of growth in Christ. But we need to place ourselves in the standards and culture of 18<sup>th</sup> C. England. The incredible profit that was being made, completely obliterated the moral conscience of the day – across the board (Think of how often that happens, Enron). The moral question would arise, but it would still take time. At this time the outcry against slavery hadn’t yet arisen. At this same time, George Whitefield accepted an offer for slaves and a South Carolina plantation, to fund the operations of his Bethesda orphanage. It was the Quakers of Pennsylvania in 1758 that first even whispered the thoughts of abolition...

And so Newton, still in the strength of his late 20s, early 30s, fell back into the business of trading trinkets and beads for able-bodied women, men, and children. He came back to those factories, tearing apart families, dragging shackled men against their will up the gangplank in heavy fetters, and bolting them to the most ghastly, overcrowded can of human squalor. On those early voyages, the darkness of

the environment was an unstoppable pull on Newton's character and morals. Newton's struggle at that time wasn't between God and slavery, it was between his desire to please God, and his worldly desires. He couldn't help himself from indulging in licentious sin that stood before him. He admitted later that he, (93) "followed a course of evil, which a few months before I should not have supposed myself any longer capable... I had little desire and no power to recover myself... by the time I arrived at Guinea I seemed to have forgotten the Lord's mercies... I was almost as bad as before." This is the struggle in those years when the conscience is awake, but there's still one foot in the world, and one foot in heaven.

**Read** Isaiah 61 speaking of the Messiah's work, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound." For John Newton, the freedom from the shackles of sin would come in stages, as he struggled with God between what he wanted to be, and what he faced in his work.

But, he was searching... and he was finding. By the light of a candle in the swing of the boat, he read and he read, and confessed, and grew. In his later ministry, John often thanked God for all the trials he endured. When he reached land, he would drink deeply of church, singing, and messages from local pastors. The fact that his struggles were deep were marks that his life transformation was genuine.

As an eventual captain he did make innovative changes. There was a compulsory Sunday service of worship, which he had to cancel once because the hull was so full, and the conditions so bad and overcrowded that sickness was killing the cargo. I will say one thing to bridge the gap – Newton was growing in his relationship with the Lord, he was making strides toward abstaining from moral failures (to the mockings of other captains), so much so that by the time of his last voyage, not a single person died on his ship.

On one particular spell at home, he inscribed the very first of 577 blank pages, (115) "Oh most blessed and glorious God, I dedicate unto thee this clean unsullied book; and at the same time renew my tender of a foul, blotted, corrupt heart. Be pleased, O Lord, to assist me with the influences of thy Spirit to fill the one in a manner agreeable to thy will, and by thy all sufficient grace to overpower and erase the ill-impressions sin and the world have from time to time made in the other, so that both my public converse and retired meditation may testify that I am indeed thy servant..."

## The shepherd loves

Newton had a hard time becoming a pastor. It was like a six year seas storm of highs and lows. At the invitation of Johnathan Edwards, Newton preached his first sermon to a total disaster. Newton dried up completely with a bad attack of speaker's nerves. "Before I had spoken 10 minutes I was stopped like Hannibal in the Alps. My ideas forsook me; darkness and confusion filled up their place. I stood on a precipice and could not advance a step forward. I stared at the people and they stared at me. Not a word more could I speak but was forced to come down and leave the people, some smiling, some weeping. My pride and self-sufficiency were sorely mortified."

## A clergyman with a common touch

He took the pastorate at a town in Olney in 1764, and stayed there for 16 years. He then accepted a second pastorate in London in 1779 at the age of 54 to St. Mary's Woolnoth in London, which he would

keep for 27 more years. For our purposes I'll talk about his pastoral approach from the church in Olney, and during his stay in London, I'll talk about his involvement with Abolitionism.

His first sermon was from Psalm 130:1-7 "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, Oh Lord!" Do you hear Newton's personal journey?

P. 187, "Newton's parish ministry was one of sermons and servanthood, yet it was characterized by a certain lightness of touch. He was a most unstuffy clergyman both in his personal appearance and in his pastoral approach. Unlike most 18<sup>th</sup> C. parsons, Newton rarely appeared in clerical dress on weekdays, preferring to wear his seaman's jacket." He would travel as much as he could into the homes of the people to visit them (especially those in personal difficulties), a sensitive and sympathetic listener. "I was their official teacher from the pulpit," he wrote a friend, "but I taught them chiefly by what I first learned from them in the course of the week by visiting and conversing from house to house." (What do the people need? I prayed that same prayer!) "My grand point in preaching is to break the hard heart, and heal the broken one."

Piper's biography - "Richard Cecil said that Newton's preaching was often not well prepared nor careful or "graceful" in delivery. But he said, "He possessed... so much affection for his people and so much zeal for their best interest, that the defect of his manner as little consideration with his constant hearer" (Memoirs, p. 92). People overlook a multitude of sins when they know you care about them.

Newton's message's were about 60 minutes. Many preachers would honk on their horns for 2 or 3 hours. I love Newton's comment, "Perhaps it is better to feed out people like chickens, a little and often, than to cram them like turkeys till they cannot hold one gobbet more."

### Cowper and the development of hymnography

Two things happened in Olney, which are connected. He was troubled that he in fact wasn't reaching the people enough. Instead of stuffing them he went out to find them. He never had any children, but he had a huge love for children, and he began to organize weekly meetings for: 1. the children, 2. The youth, 3. The mature. In his words, "The first [children] I am particularly solicitous about as a matter *indispensable* duty." He was known to take a young sailor's son on his knee and sing him a sailor's song.

In the course of this, John meets a man on one of his travels by the name of William Cowper, one of England's greatest 18<sup>th</sup> century poets and songwriters. They immediately find they had a lot in common and Newton invites him to come live in his village. They both lost their mothers at 6. Both had unhappy schooldays (Newton because of cruel masters, and Cowper because of bully's). Newton had his trials as a prisoner on the Plantanes, and Cowper had suffered violent problems of illness, then called Melancholy, today we'd call it depression.

Their friendship grew instantly. They found a house literally a stone's throw apart and rented the neighbors backyard so they could cut through the orchard each day. They were tied in spirits, united in faith and in gospel focus, both students of secular and spiritual scholarship, prolific writers, and they enjoyed long walks and companionship throughout the countryside. Cowper was Newton's companion for 12 of Newton's 16 years at Olney. When Cowper came to Olney, he was so well versed in scriptures and was such a master with words he immediately began to take the part in the sermons on Sunday, to which Newton says, "In humility, simplicity, and devotedness to God, in the clarity of his views of evangelical truth... I thought he had few equals." 210.

And here's where my two points at Olney come together. Newton had a congregation of Lace makers, laborers, artisans, and smiths. He, by this time, was well versed in theology, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, but they were lost. The established church used the King James Bible of 1662, and the common book of prayers. Both of which used language that the villagers couldn't understand. The people were left 1000 miles behind, in the dust of the ecclesiology. And so, together they began a joint effort of writing hymns, as their best effort to "promote the faith of sincere Christians." This was innovative. Newton took important theological concepts, and boiled them down into understandable language - and put them to song. At the town meeting, he'd bring another one. Cowper was a master of language and Newton felt him the superior. Over the years 1767 and 1779, hundreds were composed, and they are bound today in a book called the *Olney Hymns*. Newton and Cowper would urge the children to memorize these hymns.

Preface to the *Olney Hymns* - I dedicate them to my dear friends in the parish and neighborhood of *Olney*, for whose use the hymns were originally composed; as a testimony of the sincere love I bear them, and as a token of my gratitude to the LORD."

Cowper plunged into a huge depression, became suicidal on many instances, and was eventually completely bedridden for years. He tried to drown himself in the River Ouse, but seems to have been prevented providentially. His life lingered on for decades, on one hand totally depressed, then writing hymns. "God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform... Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take! The clouds ye so much dread, are big with mercy, and will break, with blessings on your head..."

Newton never gave up on him. At times his situation got so bad, he moved into Newton's house. Once for 5 months and once for 14 months. Cowper was so depressed! Too bad he couldn't internalize the words of his friends hymn, "The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures; He will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures."

## The abolitionist speaks

John Newton wasn't the key figure remembered in history for the campaign against abolition in England. That was William Wilberforce, 34 years younger than Newton, the politician who pushed and pushed in the house the house of Commons for 28 years. BUT... without John Newton, the story of William Wilberforce would most likely have been lost to history. Newton receives a secretive CIA looking letter from Wilberforce, "I wish to have some serious conversation with you. I have had ten thousand doubts within myself whether or not I should discover myself to you; but every argument against it has its foundation in pride. I am sure you will hold yourself bound to let no one living know of this application, or of my visit, till I release you from the obligation..."

These doubts of Wilberforce were the outflow of his own conscience. He had lived a life of idle comfort and gambling and been led right into the inner circle of the highest society in England, but his conscience had tugged on him so much that he felt he needed to make a choice between the two careers: politics and ministry.

**John Newton supported Wilberforce** – It was "old Newton" at 60, who said, "don't go in the ministry... stay in politics, and be the voice that God can use." Wilberforce recorded this in his own diary, "... when I came away I found my mind in a calm, tranquil state more humbled and looking more devoutly up to God." Newton had that effect! It was Newton that blew air into his sails and filled him with spiritual ardor. This was a clear turning point in his life. As the older man's mentoring increased, the younger



man's faith grew deeper, and the friendship moved both men into a full fledged campaign. Newton wrote him again and asked him if he was prepared to cope with the unfair insults and stigmas that were coming his way as the campaign progressed? Would he be able to maintain the rigidity of campaign politician and committed Christian?

Wilberforce was often defeated in his efforts. The power of slavery seemed indomitable, but Newton kept a healthy stream of letters flowing to him. I'll sample a few, "You have acted nobly, sir, in behalf of the poor Africans... I trust you will not lose your reward... The Lord reigns. He has all hearts in His hands. He is carrying on his great designs in a straight line, and nothing can obstruct them."

**John Newton's was a bulwark of prayer.** The closing of these letters are a bit embellished in our modern vernacular, but they reflect one thing. John Newton prayed on His behalf. He prayed for his campaign, he prayed for strength in the inner man, He prayed for victory on behalf of the African men and women, and he told Wilberforce he was doing it. That is the voice of God in someone's life. When we pray for people and lift them up, and then tell them we are doing so, that is God's voice in their life.

"My heart is often with you, that the Lord may give you a double portion of his spirit to improve the advantages and to obviate the difficulties of your situation..."

Again... "My prayers are particularly engaged for you that the Lord may furnish you with wisdom and grace, and strength."

He urged him to be in the campaign, he sustained him during the darkest moments of the campaign, and prayed for him during the length of it.

**Lastly, John Newton became an effective campaigner in his own right.** Although he always spoke against the evils of the slave trade in private gatherings, he eventually published his own pamphlet which became very popular and influential. It was called, *thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*. Newton was clearly affected by this his entire life. When Wilberforce's sons published their father's works in 1840, they spoke of Newton in this way, "Remorse for his [Newton's] own early share in its iniquity kept it so constantly before that holy man that Mr. Wilberforce frequently declared that 'he never spent one half hour in his company without hearing some allusion to it.'"

In the pamphlet he wrote, "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." John Newton became one of the most powerful witnesses in parliament against the slave trade. In fact many of the people that he was talking to had to be made aware that this revered preacher had been a slaver himself. What made him such a powerful witness was his authenticity and vividness of his reports. He could speak about the atrocities with a captain's eye view.

## Final days

With Newton's failing health, his anticipation for heaven became stronger, but his memory for what God had done for him did not grow weaker. "I am still in the land of the dying; I shall be in the land of the living soon."

"If I ever reach heaven I expect to find three wonders there first, to meet some I had not thought to see their second, to miss some I had expected to see there and third, the greatest wonder of all, to find myself there."

THE TIMES, Dec 23, 1807, headline Died, "...Aged 82 the Rev. John Newton...His unblemished life, his amiable character both as a man and as a minister and his able writings are too well known to need any comment."

Would he have been impressed? Hardly! He wrote his own ending and had it chiseled on the tombstone that now sits at Olney, "John Newton, Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy."

1 Cor 15:10, "By the grace of God, I am what I am!"

## Conclusion

Although rare among us is such a dramatic story, every one of us who looks intently at his or her life with the same lens, will also sense a prodigious amount of awe. The outcome can only be an eruption of joyous emotion. To recap the lesson: John Newton never forgot the depths of depravity that he was personally saved from. Applied over the course of a lifetime:

1. It will keep you from the fangs of spiritual pride. God's grace will be like a shield to keep us from looking down our noses at other "sinners" who are still struggling along the path. How quickly we go from humbled man or woman of God to spiritual snob.
  - a. "Whoever is truly humbled — will not be easily angry, nor harsh or critical of others. He will be compassionate and tender to the infirmities of his fellow-sinners, knowing that if there is a difference — it is grace alone which has made it!"
  - b. "When people are right with God, they are apt to be hard on themselves and easy on other people. But When they are not right with God, they are easy on themselves and hard on others."
2. It will make you a winsome person, and people will more easily relate to you, and be more attracted to Christ through you. Someone who is not afraid to be vulnerable and share a forgiven sin, or share a personal struggle, or admit weakness and show that not only did he slip up once, but that he's really a struggling sinner is relateable [David]. PSALM 51:13-14. "Create in me a clean heart O God, Restore to me the joy of your salvation... then I will teach transgressors your ways, and **sinners will return to you**... and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness."
3. It will direct you to Christian service: Sometimes God will use our personal failures, our personal ignominious acts, and redeem them so that we become champions for Christ in the struggle of that cause. Obviously Newton, but I think of a woman who anguishes over an abortion, and God fills her with compassion, a champion for the cause. A man who suffered extreme depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and takes counseling courses to equip himself for work.

## Amazing Grace

This isn't just a great hymn, this is the most known, the most sung, the most recorded, the most loved. My most memorable rendition of this song was in a California Jail. Newton didn't think anything special. He never mentioned it. It's awkwardly titled [41] "Faith's review and expectations."

The words traveled the Atlantic, and found great popularity in the US. And where would you guess it grew the strongest? The deep South. The words came to be married to a tune of in a little hymnbook

called The Southern Harmony. Quoting a commentator on the hymn (Steve Turner's tribute) – 234 “The music behind “grace” sounded graceful. There was a rise at the point of confession, as though the author was stepping out into the open and making a bold declaration but a corresponding fall when admitting his blindness.”

“The evidence points strongly to the Afro-American (slave) culture, whose religious traditions included much soulful singing about conversions from the sin filled life to the grace filled life.” 234. The compiler of this little hymnal used as his primary resource a collection of Afro-American gospel tunes known as the Plantation songs. It's most likely that it was in this context that the words were married to the tune.

In Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), there's a moving chapter (38), where Tom is harshly beaten. The thought of death was exciting, knowing that Jesus and heaven lay just a step beyond. But as the persecutor left, and the moments dragged back into the dull plod of life, and every degraded pain and bruise of his wearied body took over the consumption of his thoughts, he laid by the fire, preferring to die. But something happened within him. It says the “silent, ever-living stars, types of angelic hosts who ever look down on man; and the solitude of the night rung with the triumphant words of a hymn...” And you know whose words she writes?

“The earth shall soon dissolve like snow, the sun forbear to shine, but God who called me here below, will be forever mine. And when this mortal life shall fail, and flesh and sense shall cease, I shall possess within the veil, a life of joy and peace.”

But there's an addition to Newton's song in the book. What we sing today as the fourth verse is not of Newton's hymn from 80 years earlier in 1772. The words had been floating around plantation worship for at least 50 years [“Jerusalem my happy home”], soon to be forever wedded for eternity into the lyrics we know so well. “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.”

Newton would have been shocked from the little courtyard in Olney to see what 246 years later, God has done in the power of his influence. He couldn't have seen anything.

[References - Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing grace*, 2007; John Piper, *John Newton: the tough Roots of His habitual Tenderness*, 2001 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors; Tony Reinke: *Newton on the Christian Life*, 2015]