

John Newton – Converted Slave Trader

“I commit my soul to my gracious God and Savior, who mercifully spared and preserved me when I was an apostate, a blasphemer, and an infidel, and delivered me from the state of misery on the coast of Africa into which my obstinate wickedness had plunged me; and who has been pleased to admit me (though most unworthy) to preach his glorious gospel.”

John Newton (from his last will and testament)

His Early Years:

1) **John Newton was born in London, England on July 24, 1725. His father, also named John Newton, was a commander in the merchant service and was a trader in the Mediterranean Sea. His mother, Elizabeth was a godly woman, a devout Congregationalist who instructed him in the truth of the Word of God until she died of tuberculosis on July 11, 1732 when John was only six years old. Newton wrote concerning his mother, “I was most happy in my mother’s company and was always as willing to learn as she was to teach... Although in later years I sinned away all the advantages of my early learning, they did restrain my behavior for some time. They returned to my mind again and again, and it was a very long time before I could wholly shake them off. When the Lord finally opened mine eyes, I found that my recollection of them was of great benefit. My dear mother, besides the care she took with me, often commended me to God with many prayers and tears.” From this point Newton began, what one author termed, a “decline into rebellion and degradation that lasted until his 24th year.” Newton spent two years at a boarding school in Stratford between the ages of eight and ten and when he was eleven he went to sea with his father. He made six voyages with him until he retired in 1742 and became the governor of York Fort, under the Hudson Bay Company, where he died by drowning in 1751.**

2) **In 1743, John was forced to enlist into the British navy and served on board the H.M.S. Harwick, and through his father’s influence was made a midshipman. His friend, Richard Cecil later said of Newton that during this time “the companions that he met with here completed the ruin of his principles.” Newton wrote of himself that “I was capable of anything; I had not the least fear of God before my eyes nor the least sensibility of conscience.” On one of his visits home he attempted to desert, and when caught, he was flogged and degraded to the rank of a common seaman.**

3) **When he was 20 years old, at his own request, he was exchanged off Madeira to the crew of a slave ship which took him to the coast of Sierra Leone. There he became the servant of a slave trader for one and a half years on one of the Plantane Islands and suffered brutal treatment. In time he became another slave trader’s servant who treated him much more humanely and even gave him some share in the business. Early in 1747, he was rescued from his position of servitude at a place called Kittam (another small island in southern Sierra Leone) by the captain of a slave ship named the Greyhound whom his father had asked to look out for him. Newton remained on this ship for over a year and then one night on his way home to England on the North Atlantic, the Lord began the work of drawing him to himself.**

His Conversion:

1) **Prior to this point, Newton had lost all sense of religion and afterwards accused himself of degrading debauchery. But on the night of March 21, 1748, a date that Newton would for the rest of his life mark as “a day of humiliation and thanksgiving for his great deliverance”, God intervened in Newton’s life and got his attention by means of a violent storm. In the middle of the night Newton awoke from sleep and immediately became aware that the ship was in trouble as his room was filling with water. As he ran toward the deck, he met the captain who assigned him to the pumps where he worked from three in the morning until noon and then took the wheel and endeavored to steer the ship through the storm until midnight. During this time the crew had tied themselves to the ship to avoid being washed overboard. He recorded in his journal that as he manned the wheel that there came a point at which all seemed lost and he became convinced that the ship would sink, that he cried out “Lord, have mercy on us!” At six o’clock in the evening it began to appear that there might be hope and Newton later wrote “I thought I saw the hand of God displayed in our favor and I began to pray.” Once the storm had subsided, Newton returned to his room and reflected on what he had said and believed that God had answered his prayer and brought them safely through the storm.**

2) Newton immediately found a Bible and spent the rest of the voyage home reading and praying over the Scriptures. Two weeks later the ship anchored in Ireland. Newton described what took place in his heart during the final two weeks of the voyage by saying, "Thus far I was answered, that before we arrived in Ireland, I had satisfactory evidence in my own mind of the truth of the Gospel, as considered in itself, and of its exact suitableness to answer all of my needs... I stood in need of an almighty Savior; and such a one I found described in the New Testament. Thus far the Lord had wrought a marvelous thing: I was no longer an infidel: I heartily renounced my former profaneness, and had taken up some right notions; was seriously disposed, and sincerely touched with a sense of the undeserved mercy I had received, in being brought safe through so many dangers. I was sorry for my past misspent life, and purposed an immediate reformation. I was quite freed from the habit of swearing, which seemed to have been as deeply rooted in me as a second nature. Thus, to all appearance, I was a new man."

3) Though this was a remarkable change in his life, later he would testify from a more mature standpoint that he did not believe that full conversion had taken place at this time. He later said, "I was greatly deficient in many respects. I was in some degree affected with a sense of my enormous sins, but I was little aware of the innate evils of my heart. I had no apprehension of the hidden life of a Christian, as it consists in communion with God by Jesus Christ: a continual dependence on him ...I acknowledged the Lord's mercy in pardoning what was past, but depended chiefly upon my own resolution to do better for the time to come ... I cannot consider myself to have been a believer (in the full sense of the word) till a considerable time afterwards."

4) Newton admitted that for six years he had no "Christian friend or faithful minister to advise me." Thus a friend of his father's, Joseph Manestay, convinced him to return to the sea and secured a position for him as first mate aboard a slave trading vessel, the *Brownlow*, bound for the West Indies via the coast of Guinea. It was during the first leg of this voyage, while in West Africa, that Newton acknowledged the inadequacy of his spiritual life. It was while he was sick with a fever that he later professed that he experienced true conversion and for the first time felt totally at peace with God.

His Life's Ministry:

1) Newton returned to England in December of 1749 and on February 1, 1750 he married Mary Catlett, a young woman with whom he had been in love with since 1742. Newton later wrote concerning Mary, "At the first sight of this girl, I felt an affection for her that never abated or lost its influence a single moment in my heart."

2) Following their marriage, he made three more voyages as captain of the slave trading ships *Duke of Argyle* (1750) and *The African* (1752-53 and 1753-54). As captain of these ships, Newton repressed swearing and immorality and conducted a religious service twice every Sunday with the crew. Though he saw to it that the slaves on his ships were treated in a humane manner, in his later years he became increasingly remorseful for his activities in the slave trade and even joined William Wilberforce in opposing it. Finally in November of 1754, after suffering an epileptic seizure at sea, he gave up seafaring and never sailed again.

3) During these voyages, Newton studied Latin and the Scriptures. After leaving the sea, he worked as a tide surveyor in Liverpool from 1755 to 1760. During his spare time he studied Greek, Hebrew and Syriac. During this time he came to know George Whitfield and became his enthusiastic disciple, so much so that he gained the nickname "Young Whitfield." At a later time, Newton became friends with Wesley as well.

4) He became well known as an evangelical lay minister and applied to be ordained in the Church of England in 1757, a request which was initially refused. He persisted, and on June 17, 1764 he was ordained to the pastorate at Olney, Buckinghamshire. Newton faithfully discharged the trust that he had been given. Newton loved people. His love for the lost as well as the redeemed was the signature of his earthly ministry. As a result, he soon became well known, not so much for his doctrine, but mainly for his pastoral care and friendship to Anglicans and Nonconformists alike. It was said of Newton's preaching that it was often not well prepared or graceful in delivery but he "possessed so much affection for his people and so much zeal for their best interests, that the defect of his manner was little consideration with his constant hearers." He spent 16 years at Olney and during this time drew large crowds to hear him preach, so much so that the church building had to be added onto. The prayer meetings which were well attended, not only by his parishioners, but also by dissenting ministers who helped lead in prayer, needed to be held in Lord Dartmouth's old mansion in what was called the "Great House." Newton preached ceaselessly, not only in the church building in Olney, but in cottages and homes scattered throughout the area.

- 5) In 1767, the poet William Cowper settled in Olney and he and Newton became good friends. Cowper helped Newton in the services that he conducted and at one point, they determined to write a new hymn for each weekly service. These hymns eventually were compiled and became known as the "Olney Hymnal", the first edition of which was published in 1779. It contained 68 pieces by Cowper and 280 by Newton. Among Newton's hymns which are still loved and widely sung today are "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken", "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" and the one that he is best known for, "Amazing Grace." This hymn was written to accompany a New Years sermon whose text was 1 Chronicles 17:16 which says, "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?"
- 6) In 1780, Newton left Olney to become pastor at St Mary's Woolnoth in London where he began a 27 year ministry. Here he ministered to a large congregation and influenced many, including William Wilberforce. Initially Wilberforce desired to enter the ministry, but Newton encouraged him to stay in Parliament and "serve God where he was." Wilberforce listened to the ex-slave captain's advice and spent the next 20 years working to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire.
- 7) When Newton turned 80, his good friend Richard Cecil encouraged him to cease preaching because his sight and hearing were failing. To this Newton responded, "What! Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?" He would continue to preach until October of 1806 when he was 81 years old. At the age of 82, Newton said, "My memory is nearly gone but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior." Until the day that he died, John never ceased to be amazed that, as he wrote at the age of 72, "that such a wretch should not only be spared and pardoned, but reserved for the honor of preaching thy Gospel, which he had blasphemed and renounced ... this is wonderful indeed! The more thou hast exalted me, the more I aught to abase myself."
- 8) John Newton died on December 21, 1807. A month before he died he expressed his settled faith by saying, "It is a great thing to die; and, when flesh and heart fail, to have God for the strength of our heart, and our portion forever. I know whom I have believed, and he is able to keep that which I have committed against that great day. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous judge shall give me in that day."
- 9) Newton's tombstone reads, "John Newton, Clerk, 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."