

Preserved, Restored, Pardoned, and Appointed to Preach the Faith: The Life and Legacy of John Newton

David G. Norman, Jr.
Assistant, Oxford Study Tour
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Fort Worth, TX
dnorman@swbts.edu

The Ship Captain's Son

John Newton was born in 1725 in London. His father was distant, working as a ship's captain and his mother was a devout member of the Old Gravel Lane Dissenting Chapel in Wapping. Two magnetic entities—the sea and the gospel—called out to young Newton from the very beginning. Newton was baptized as an infant and trained at his mother's knee until she was overwhelmed by tuberculosis when he was six. He was gifted with an incredible memory; he had memorized the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* as well as the responses to Isaac Watts' *A Short View of the Whole of Scripture History* by the age of 6. Yet, his formal education ceased at 10 years of age when his father determined that it was time that his son follow in his footsteps leading to sea.

He sailed five times with his father to the Mediterranean before he was 18. Even after spending such significant time with his father, he reflected, "I am persuaded he loved me, but he seemed not willing that I should know it. I was with him in a state of fear and bondage. His sternness . . . broke and overawed my spirit."¹

While running an errand for his father, a seventeen-year-old John Newton met and subsequently fell in love with thirteen-year-old Mary "Polly" Catlett. His affection for Polly cost him what seemed to be a lucrative opportunity to manage a sugar plantation in Jamaica. Yet, he felt the cost to be worth it. His love for Polly made any possibility of living so far from his beloved unfeasible. He had determined that he would not go. He set his mind to settling-in and making his fortune as his father had. So in the hopes of one day marrying his beloved, Newton returned to the sea.

In 1744, he was press-ganged into the Royal Navy. This was a common practice in the eighteenth-century, when naval captains would force able-bodied young men into service for the defense of the realm. Newton was detained, jailed, and upon discovering the boy's previous experience onboard a ship, was forced into service. During this time, Newton's behavior and attitude turned exceedingly sour. Sailors are not known for their delicate speech and modest behavior, and yet, according to recent biographer Jonathan Aitken, "Newton had become such an aggressive atheist and blasphemer that even his shipmates were shocked by his oaths."²

Newton made an attempt to desert when he discovered that his ship would be leaving the shores of England for a five-year voyage far from Polly, but was captured and bound, "confined two days in the guard-house; . . . kept a while in irons . . . publicly stripped and whipt, degraded

¹Richard Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton, in The Works of the Rev. John Newton, Vol. 1* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 2.

²Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 19.

from his office.”³ Newton was a constant problem, so when his captain had the opportunity to exchange the troublesome Newton for another able-bodied sailor, Newton found himself across the world on a slave-trading vessel.

Slave Boat Captain

Newton’s time on this ship was brief due to a combination of his poor attitude, defiant spirit, and the death of a captain who had tolerated the young Newton as a result of his respect for the elder, ship captain John Newton. Newton eventually found himself suffering as a white slave at the cruel hands of slave traders in West Africa. After more than a year in captivity, a ship that happened to be captained by another friend of Newton’s father, dropped anchor nearby, and Newton was freed from his bondage and taken aboard, bound home for England.

It was on this voyage home that Newton awoke in a storm that was threatening to sink the ship. The crew of the ship worked tirelessly, and every ounce of energy was put into keeping the ship afloat. Newton labored for unbearably long hours steering the ship and running the pumps. It was during these moments at the helm that Newton’s thoughts turned to his need for God’s mercy. Years later he reflected, “I began to pray: I could not utter the prayer of faith; I could not draw near to a reconciled God, and call him Father . . . the comfortless principles of infidelity were deeply riveted.”⁴ Though he did not view this as his moment of conversion, Newton often reflected on his deliverance from death and the marvelous grace of God on the anniversary of the storm. On March 10, 1748, Newton’s spiritual trajectory changed.⁵

He married his Polly on February 1, 1750 and returned to the sea initially as a first mate, and then as the captain of a slave boat before an epileptic seizure would eliminate the possibility of any future sea-faring almost five years later. It may seem scandalous to modern sensitivities that the theologian that would undergird and uphold the abolition movement in England had once captained a ship transporting slaves to the Americas, but, as Aitken wrote, “Newton’s lack of moral qualms about the slave trade merely showed that he was a young man of his time.”⁶ But his experiences as a first mate, and as a ship captain, eventually became his testimony before Parliament in the abolition effort.

The Happy Marriage

John’s love for his beloved Polly stands as a timeless example of the manner in which husbands should love their wives. So devout was John in his affections for his bride that he often wrote in his journal of his great fear that Polly had become an idol distracting him from his devotion to God. When he was at sea, he longed for her. When he was press-ganged, it was as he was hoping to see her. When one day of shoreleave turned into weeks, it was because he had gone to see her. When he attempted to desert from the Royal Navy, it was to be near her. When he was destitute and suffering in West Africa, his hope was that he might see her again. When rescue came, his joy was that he might marry her.

Yet, to those not named John Newton, Polly did not appear to be anything special. She was not overly beautiful, or outgoing, or spiritual, or intelligent. She was, however, his closest friend

³Cecil, *Memoirs*, 10.

⁴*Ibid.*, 28.

⁵Newton recorded this anniversary throughout his life as March 21, 1748, but Aitken ascribes this discrepancy to an eleven-day change in the calendar in 1752. See Aitken, *John Newton*, 75.

⁶Aitken, *John Newton*, 91.

and confidant. At times, Newton's letters to his beloved demonstrate his struggle to communicate on a level that she could understand all that he was learning in his studies.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of his Polly was her constancy. She was his North Star, always present, caring, and supportive of her husband's endeavors. Over the course of their forty-year marriage, Polly was the wife of a sailor, a ship captain, a Surveyor of Tides (a bureaucratic position), and a pastor. There is no evidence of any frustration on her part that her husband aspired to serve in the church, though she clearly preferred that he remain in the Church of England rather than any of the other separatist denominations that were developing at the time. She was a loving and hospitable pastor's wife, who cared for those like William Cowper, the brilliant poet and hymnist, who would come to live with the Newtons. Three years after her death, John published a collection of letters that he had written to her after they were married demonstrating his unwavering affection for his bride.

Pastor and Poet

Newton identified himself as a Methodist, though at the time, Methodism was not an alternate denomination from the Established Church, but rather a group that emphasized the influence of the Holy Spirit and the assurance of justification by faith, and hoped to revitalize the Church of England. When he felt called to the pastorate, he sought ordination in the Established Church, only to be refused on the basis of his enthusiasm (the eighteenth-century codeword for Methodism). This is not necessarily a surprise in light of his friendships with John Wesley and George Whitefield, with whom he spent so much time that he earned the nickname, "Little Whitefield."

As a layperson, Newton often attended a Baptist church, but "was reluctant to become a Baptist himself, apparently because he did not see the necessity for full bodily immersion or for changing his allegiance from the Church of England."⁷ According to Hindmarsh, Newton was, himself, a five-point Calvinist,⁸ but his Calvinism was tempered. When a critic noted that at times Newton sounded like a Calvinist, and others he did not, Newton responded,

"I am not fond of calling myself by any particular name in religion... I am more of a Calvinist than anything else, but I use my Calvinism in my writings and my preaching as I use this sugar." Newton picked up a lump a sugar, dropped it into his cup, stirred it, and concluded, "I do not give it alone and whole but mixed and diluted."⁹

In 1795, he wrote that, "If a man is born again, hates sin, and depends upon the Saviour for life and grace, I care not whether he be an Arminian or a Calvinist. If he be not born again, he is nothing, let him be called by what name he will."¹⁰ Newton's emphasis upon evangelism was without question. Of his pastoral commission, he wrote, "Grace, free grace, must be the substance of my discourse, to tell all the world from my own experience that there is mercy for blasphemers, for the most hardened, the most complicated wretches."¹¹

⁷Ibid., 134.

⁸D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 13.

⁹Aitken, *John Newton*, 286.

¹⁰Aitken, *John Newton*, 340.

¹¹Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, 112.

He was appointed to the church in Olney in 1764, six years after the initial rejection of his ordination. It was also near this time that his autobiography, *An Authentic Narrative*, was published, in which he recounted his life upon the sea, his rebellion against God, and the amazing grace that saved such a wretch as he. His memoirs sold widely and made Newton an attraction in Olney, where he drew church congregants from surrounding towns and villages, as far as London. He was a preacher who did not look or sound like a preacher. During the week, he shunned clerical vestments and preferred ordinary clothing. He was warm and friendly. He started prayer meetings and additional services to accommodate both the growing congregation and his desire to make disciples of those under his care.

One of those under his care was a brilliant poet, William Cowper, who moved to Olney because of a pre-existing relationship with Newton. Newton and Cowper were dear friends, and Cowper became an unofficial assistant to Newton, joining him on pastoral visitations. He also used his gifted pen to assist Newton in the writing of hymns illustrating Newton's sermons. These hymns were written to cement the truths of Scripture into the hearts of the church. Many of these hymns are preserved in *Olney Hymns*, yet Cowper's contributions are minimal in comparison to Newton's. This is largely due to a mental breakdown suffered by Cowper in 1773, during which he "was only narrowly prevented from committing suicide by Newton's dramatic intervention."¹² Cowper never fully recovered, and though remaining a believer, was convinced that he had disobeyed God by not taking his life that night.

In 1779, after 15 years of ministry, Newton transitioned from the church in Olney to London. During his ministry in London, Newton influenced a young member of Parliament, named William Wilberforce. Their relationship preceded Newton's pastorate in London, but it was in London that Newton became a theological mentor to Wilberforce. Wilberforce had led a sinful life, much in the same manner as Newton, and had been rescued by the gracious mercy of God. When he questioned Newton about leaving Parliament in order to enter the ministry, Newton instead urged him to stay in politics, insisting that Wilberforce could accomplish God's will in that role. Newton and Wilberforce spoke often about the evils of the slave trade, and it was Wilberforce's relentless energy paired with Newton's eyewitness testimony that eventually brought it to an end in England. He described the atrocities he observed before Parliament and published them in a pamphlet, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (1788). His testimony resulted in England no longer being able to claim deniability of these horrors, thus Parliament began the process of abolishing the practice of slavery and ending England's part in the slave trade.

Amazing Grace, His Most Enduring Legacy

His most famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*, was (as were his other hymns) not written in the hopes of gaining fame and fortune, or in the hopes that generations later would join together and sing, but rather was written as an illustration of his sermon text one Sunday, 1 Chronicles 17:16-17, which in the King James Version states,

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? 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.

¹²Aitken, *John Newton*, 21.

The much-beloved final verse was not written by Newton. His version ends, with the verse, “The earth shall soon dissolve like snow, the sun forbear to shine, but God, who call’d me here below, will be forever mine.” The verse proclaiming that “when we’ve been there ten thousand years,” was added in print by Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852, nearly eighty years after the hymn was originally penned. The hymn is easily the most recognizable and recorded song in history, and yet, it must be remembered that it began as a pastoral tool, to assist his congregation in recognizing that God’s grace is indeed amazing and is the hope of the every wretched sinner.

Days before his death in December 1801, Newton said “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.”¹³ He was originally buried in London, but due to the need for underground transportation tunnels, he and Polly’s bodies were exhumed and re-interred here in Olney in 1893. Per his wishes, his gravestone reads with his testimony, “Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy...”

¹³Ibid., 386.