

Written for author newsletter

November 2021 – March 2022

4609 words (total)

The Story of John Newton

(five parts)

Part I

(849 words)

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found;

Was blind, but now I see.

“Amazing Grace” is one of the best-loved songs of Christianity. But it takes on extra meaning when we consider the man who wrote it—a man who truly understood amazing grace. Last Sunday, my church had a special event to honor historic Christians, and I chose to portray the wife of this month’s subject. I learned so much that I wanted to share it. So let’s take a hop across the pond to jolly old England, where John Newton’s life began in 1725 with every indication of a bright spiritual future. His father was a sea captain, often absent, but his mother was a devoted Christian with a passion for teaching her son. By the age of four, John was reading well, and his mother taught him to memorize large passages of Scripture, poetry, hymns, and the catechism.

But John’s mother died when he was seven, and his future took on a different tone. His father remarried, and John was “permitted to mingle with profane and careless children, and soon began to learn their ways.” He also lost the influence of his mother’s close friends, the Catlett family, who disapproved of his father’s new marriage. After a stint in boarding school, John was at sea—figuratively and literally.

From the age of eleven, John sailed with his father, a man of “remarkable good sense” whose severity kept John from accepting his influence. The bad habits John had begun to pick up did not improve. He admitted that he “had little concern about religion,” yet was often disturbed by his conscience. To deal with this, John started to pray regularly, read the Scriptures, and keep a diary. “I was presently religious in my own eyes,” he said. “But, alas! this seeming goodness had no solid foundation....I was soon weary, gradually gave it up, and became worse than before.”

A few brushes with death, including a nasty fall from a horse and the drowning of a friend, revived John’s attempts at spiritual living, but never for very long. He estimated that he alternately took up and laid aside religious practices three or four times by the age of sixteen—“All this while my heart was

insincere.” He still enjoyed living in sin and used his daily ritual of prayer to soothe his conscience before engaging in things he knew to be wrong.

His final attempt at morality was by far his strictest. He said, “I did everything that might be expected of a person entirely ignorant of God’s righteousness, and desirous to establish his own.” John became such an ascetic that he later called himself “gloomy, stupid, unsociable, and useless.” In this frame of mind, he ran up against another dangerous doctrine: the exaltation of reason. This philosophy, emphasizing man’s natural reason and “inherent virtue” while denying the need for God, appealed to John.

By this time, John had become rather fond of a “visionary, contemplative life,” with an aversion to hard work. A friend of his father arranged for John to spend a few years in business in Jamaica. Shortly before his scheduled departure, John went to Kent on business for his father, and in Kent, everything changed. His mother’s old friends, the Catletts, heard he would be in town and invited him to visit. He barely remembered the family, but he visited them anyway. And fell in love.

Mary Catlett, “Polly” to her friends, was still shy of fourteen—marriageable age back then, but still decidedly young. John was seventeen and besotted. He later wrote, “Almost at the first sight of this girl...I felt an affection for her, which never abated or lost its influence a single moment in my heart. In degree, it equaled all that the writers of romance have imagined; in duration it was unalterable.”

But devotion to Polly Catlett could not save John Newton. It would take an even greater love than that. At this stage of his life, the only spiritual effect of John’s “violent and commanding passion” was his break with the “dull melancholy habit” he had self-righteously adopted for the last two years. Apparently, being gloomy, stupid, unsociable, and useless was not an option around Polly. The other effect of John’s passion was a sudden disregard for everything other than Polly Catlett. He decided it would be impossible to go to Jamaica and be away from her. But he couldn’t find the nerve to tell his father. So he stayed in Kent for three weeks instead of three days...and missed his boat.

Since John is so thoroughly determined to stay in Kent, we’ll leave him to his own devices until next month, when he’ll sail off to Venice for a brief stint and then come back and get himself in more trouble than before. Yet eventually he would look back and write,

Through many dangers, toils, and snares

I have already come.

’Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home.”

Part II

(863 words)

We left Newton in Kent, where he had missed his boat to Jamaica in order to be closer to Polly Catlett. Shortly after this, John sailed to Venice. The sailors were bad company, and John abandoned his careful code of self-righteousness. He was often convicted of his sin, even having a dream that made a “very strong, though not abiding” impression on him. But soon he was back in Kent to visit Polly. He

“protracted [his] stay in the same imprudent manner as before,” and his father nearly disowned him. He probably would have arranged another business venture for John, but the Royal Navy got there first.

In early 1744, John was pressured into sea service. His father arranged for him to receive the rank of midshipman. John later wrote, “I met with companions who completed the ruin of my principles.” One of his closest friends aboard ship was a master of “free thinking”—relying on reason alone and rejecting the God of the Bible. John was quite impressed and soon agreed with him wholeheartedly. But in December, John used part of his shore liberty to visit Polly, willfully overstayed his leave, and lost all favor with his captain.

When John’s ship returned to England after a long voyage, John heard about some prosperous business opportunities and decided the life of the Navy was not for him. Sent ashore to keep other sailors from deserting, John himself deserted and made tracks for Dartmouth. All went swimmingly for a day and a half. Then John ran into a party of soldiers who immediately figured him out. They hauled him off to the guardhouse for two days, then sent him back to his ship, where he was put in irons, then publicly flogged and demoted.

John was miserable. Worst of all was knowing he would probably never see Polly Catlett again. Her mother, concerned by John’s rash decisions, had already asked him not to return to the Catlett house until he had either given up his infatuation or had his father’s blessing. John was tempted to throw himself overboard, but “the secret hand of God restrained [him].” He had a five-year voyage ahead of him, and his pride was so injured that he wavered between ending his own life and murdering the captain. His love for Polly was his last restraint—he couldn’t stand to have her think ill of him after he was dead.

Eventually, John negotiated for a place on a different ship. Here, he said, “I not only sinned with a high hand myself but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion.” He made an enemy of this captain as well (writing songs to ridicule your commander and teaching them to the whole crew is not a good plan), but when the captain died, his replacement was on even worse terms with John. After obtaining his discharge, John entered the service of a slave trader on an island off the African coast.

John’s new employer lived with an African woman who quickly made John’s life miserable all over again. Severely ill, John often survived on the mercy of slaves who shared their rations with him. He suffered the woman’s abuse until his employer finally took John on a voyage. When he was falsely accused of stealing his employer’s goods, John was again in dire straits, but he later wrote, “My conduct, principles, and heart were still darker than my outward condition.” The only comfort he had was a copy of Euclid’s geometry, which he studied by drawing diagrams in the sand. During this time, John wrote to his father to ask for help. He also wrote letters to Polly.

Later that year, John moved to live with another trader, and his circumstances took a drastic turn for the better. He started enjoying his new life in Africa, and when his father finally sent a ship for him, John was not particularly interested in being rescued. So the captain invented a tale about an inheritance waiting in England. The thought of such wealth, combined with the hope of seeing Polly again, convinced John to leave Africa. The ship was on a long merchant voyage, so John stayed aboard as a passenger for nearly a year.

None of his experiences had changed his heart. His ability with profanity earned reproof even from the captain, “who was a very passionate man and not at all circumspect in his expressions.” When trouble arose for the ship and its crew, the captain claimed John was a “Jonah.” By now, John’s conscience had ceased to bother him. “Neither judgments nor mercies made the least impression on me.”

But in March of 1748, John read *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. John had read it before as a means of killing time. This time, he suddenly wondered, *What if these things should be true?*

He shut the book and “put an abrupt end to these reflections.” But he could not put an abrupt end to God’s work. The Lord’s time was come, as John later said, and that night would change his life forever. Next time, we’ll see the how and why.

Part III

(991 words)

We left John Newton in March of 1748, still a reprobate living aboard ship and making enemies of every authority figure. Sometime in the middle of March, John got bored and read *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. He had read it before, but this time it struck him—what if Christianity were actually true?

John didn’t like that idea, so he put the book down and went about his business. That night, a violent storm arose. John awoke to find his cabin filling with water and sailors shouting that the ship was going down. The ship became a wreck in only a few minutes. At first, the storm didn’t affect John. He helped the crew pump and bail water and joked that it would be a fine story to tell over a glass of wine. Later in the night, he spoke to the captain about their efforts and said, almost without thinking, “If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us!”

No sooner had he said it than he realized, *What mercy can there be for me?*

After pumping for several hours, he was sent to steer at the helm, where he had plenty of time to think. Bible verses he had once known came back to mind. At first, he decided his sins were too great to be forgiven and all he could do was wait for the worst. But when the ship was finally out of danger, John saw a gleam of hope. He knew Jesus had died for the sins of those who would put their trust in Him. But John had spent so long denying biblical truth that although he wished the Bible could be true, he couldn’t quite believe that it was.

Knowing it would be a mockery to profess faith in something he didn’t believe, John set out to discover if the Bible was really true and divinely inspired. He started by studying the New Testament, and there he found Luke 11:13: “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?” John reasoned that if the Bible was true, then that promise was true, and he could prove it by asking for the Spirit and seeing if God kept His word. If John acted as if the gospel were true and studied it from that basis, perhaps he would be confirmed in it and able to believe. As the storm passed and the ship continued on its way, John spent most of his leisure time “reading and meditating on the Scriptures, and praying to the Lord for mercy and instruction.” On the day the ship reached port, the very last of its provisions gave out. John said, “About this time I began to know that there is a God who hears and answers prayer.”

By the time the ship reached its destination in Ireland, John was convinced in his own mind of the truth of the gospel and “its exact suitableness to all my needs,” and recognized that the divine justice he had so feared was satisfied in the sacrifice of Christ. From that time forward, John truly became a new man. His habit of profanity completely left him. But John didn’t have many true Christian friends or access to biblical preaching, and depending on the Lord for lasting change was still foreign to 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.”

(This stage of John’s spiritual growth really struck me. How often do I act as if I believe God has pardoned me, but I still have to “do better” under my own power?)

During his stay in Ireland, John wrote to his father. His father left England before John returned, and John never saw him again, but he received two or three affectionate letters that proved his father had forgiven him. Also, before the elder Mr. Newton left England, he stopped in Kent and gave his permission for John to marry Polly Catlett. Now the only person left to agree was Polly—and “with her I stood at as great an uncertainty as the first day I saw her.”

Another shipowner befriended John and offered him the command of a ship, but John felt he should take another voyage as a sailor first and learn to obey. Before he left, he got the chance to visit Polly. She was “free from any other engagement, and not unwilling to wait the event of the voyage I had undertaken.” John had to be satisfied with that.

After leaving on his next voyage in the summer of 1748, John started to discover that he couldn’t reform himself as easily as he had thought. He slipped gradually back into sin and was reminded of the Lord’s mercy to him only when a “violent fever” stopped him in his tracks. As he recovered, he stopped making resolves of his own and cast himself on the mercy of the Lord. “I do not remember that any particular text, or remarkable discovery was presented to my mind; but, in general, I was enabled to hope and believe in a crucified Saviour.” Throughout the long voyage, which extended as far as Charleston, South Carolina, John grew in his walk with the Lord. He still didn’t understand how to avoid temptation or what it meant to be separate from the world, but he was learning.

At long last, John returned to Kent and the love of his life. It had been over seven years since he had first fallen for Polly Catlett. John recorded the ensuing events in language considerably calmer than his feelings must have been: “Friends on all sides consenting, the point was now entirely between ourselves. Accordingly our hands were joined on February 1, 1750.”

Part IV

(666 words)

After John married Mary “Polly” Catlett in 1750, he commanded two different slave ships over the course of five years. Later, John would reflect on this period with horror. But for now, as for countless other upstanding businessmen, the slave trade was business as usual, although John said he regarded himself as a sort of jailer and was sometimes shocked by the nature of his employment. He began to ask the Lord to place him in “a more humane calling” and one that would not require to him to be away from home and Christian fellowship for months on end.

In the meantime, John used his plentiful spare time to continue his studies of mathematics and classical Latin. The more he learned and grew, though, the less the classics mattered to him. Deciding his life was too short for “such elaborate trifling,” John later wrote that “Neither poet nor historian could tell me a word of Jesus, and I therefore applied myself to those who could. The classics were at first confined to one morning in the week, and at length quite laid aside.” The same thing happened with his mathematics. He grew tired of “cold contemplative truths which can neither warm nor amend the heart.” Between his two voyages, he began keeping a diary. He was concerned by how much he idolized his wife, worrying incessantly when her letters were delayed, and he often felt that he loved the gift more than the Giver. But Polly was a spiritual support to him, encouraging him to begin a private prayer time with her when he was still too reserved about his faith to do so.

Despite the unholy nature of his business, John grew by leaps and bounds in his long times alone at sea with the Lord. He observed the power of God in controlling the sea and preserving him from many dangers, toils, and snares. He met Christian captains in other ports who encouraged him in his faith. One man in particular pointed John toward good teachers and helped him understand that his salvation was preserved not by his own merit but “by the mighty power and promise of God, through faith in an unchangeable Savior.”

Late in 1754, just as John was about to set off on a third voyage, a seizure ended his maritime career. At the same time, a similar illness struck Polly. For about eleven months, John watched her visibly deteriorate until she was so weak she could barely cross a room. But after John took a government post in Liverpool, “the Lord was pleased to restore Mrs. Newton by His own hand, when all hopes from ordinary means were at an end.”

John began attending the preaching of men like George Whitefield and John Wesley. Over the next several years, he studied theology and learned from the great preachers around him. Some people even took to calling him “Little Whitefield.” He took up classical languages again, but this time his goal was the study of the Scriptures—Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac were his courses of study. Polly, too, attended dissenter meetings even when John was away on business. He gently teased her that if she spent too much time with the dissenters, she would soon be thought as peculiar as her husband. John’s mother had been a dissenter from the Church of England, and as John began to consider going into ministry, he considered becoming a dissenter preacher. However, “preferring the Established Church in some respects,” he asked for ordination in the Church of England but was twice refused. Finally, in 1764, he was ordained as curate of Olney parish. He would preach there for sixteen years.

Next month, in our final segment on the life of John Newton, I want to look at the effect this man had on friends, family, politicians, and even us today—because amazing grace is like that, filling lives and spilling over onto others. As the Apostle Paul said it, abundance of grace!

Part V

(1240 words)

After his ordination as curate of the Olney parish, John’s passionate evangelical preaching and genuine love for the people under him had an amazing effect on the parish. Always sympathetic to dissenters and nonconformists, John reached out to Baptist, Methodist, and “Independent” congregations in the

surrounding area. Many joined open prayer meetings. The denominational line-crossing raised a few eyebrows in the parish, especially when John gave awards for scripture memorization—and two awards went to dissenter children. The following Sunday, John preached a sermon on the Good Samaritan and warned of the dangers of a “party spirit.”

While at Olney, John began writing hymns for weekly worship and took a fellow hymnwriter under his wing. William Cowper was suffering from severe “melancholy” when John and Polly opened their home to him. Under their care, Cowper enjoyed the most productive and stable years of his life, helping John in local ministry and hymn writing as a way of combating the terrible depression that still lurked in the offing. After several years, however, Cowper’s depression came roaring back. He became suicidal and, even after he recovered, never felt worthy to go on serving God—although he did just that whether he realized it or not, lending his poetic talent to the later fight against the slave trade. John Newton stuck by him through all of it.

Just before this trying time, John wrote “Amazing Grace.” It was later published in *Olney Hymns* under the title “Faith’s Review and Expectation,” suited to multiple common English tunes. Not until the 1800s, when it was paired with the tune we now know, did “Amazing Grace” find its wings. No one is quite sure where the tune came from, but its marriage with “Amazing Grace” was established by a singing instructor from South Carolina who combined tune and lyrics in his 1835 *Southern Harmony*. The rest is history.

In 1774, John and Polly adopted Polly’s orphaned five-year-old niece. By this time, John had established himself as a writer of not only hymns but also ecclesiastical history and several works on Christian life. Then the American Revolution began. John tried to avoid openly taking sides, but he felt very strongly that England was in the wrong, and his ties with dissenters, many of whom vociferously supported the American cause, put John on shaky political ground. Around the same time, Polly’s health took a turn for the worse. In subsequent years, John’s effect in Olney waned. After an ugly scene on Guy Fawkes Day in November of 1777, things went downhill until John received an invitation to a new curacy and felt it was God’s will that he accept. After sixteen years of ministry at Olney, the Newton family moved to London.

John’s ministry there soon took off. He remained strongly supportive of the Church of England, but he reported that “[Anglican] Churchmen and Dissenters, Calvinists and Arminians, Methodists and Moravians, now and then I believe Papists and Quakers sit quietly to hear me.” He believed that the best way to combat false doctrine was simply to teach truth—that if a bushel basket was filled with wheat, there would be no room in it for tares. His family life was busy, too; in 1783, he and Polly adopted another of Polly’s nieces, an orphaned twelve-year-old suffering from consumption. Eliza would only live to be fourteen, but John and Polly poured love into her and rejoiced at her faith.

Throughout the 1780s, John’s sphere of influence began to expand and shift. Although John said, “I have no temptation to turn politician,” his influence would shake England’s political world, starting with William Wilberforce. In 1785, the up-and-coming member of Parliament sent John a request for a private audience. The young Wilberforce had come to faith in Christ and feared that truly serving the Lord meant abandoning his political career and becoming a clergyman. John calmed Wilberforce’s turmoil and encouraged him to serve the Lord exactly where God had put him. The result was Wilberforce’s powerful Christian influence on British politics.

Next was Hannah More. A poet, witty conversationalist, and rising star of London society, More was searching for something deeper. She found it when she came to hear John preach. Like Wilberforce, More lived out her newfound faith in her own sphere, turning her considerable talents to the cause of Christian service, education, and reform on behalf of the poor. Through these two people and others, John was drawn to the heart of a robust new movement: the fight against the slave trade.

In 1788, John published a pamphlet titled *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. “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,” he wrote in the pamphlet’s introduction. He argued against the slave trade on many fronts, noting its barbaric effects on both Africans and slave traders and condemning the notion that Africans were savages. Later that same year, John appeared as a witness before Parliament as the British government wrestled with abolition. More and more people became aware of atrocities they had ignored or never noticed.

In the midst of all this, Polly Newton discovered she had terminal breast cancer. Over a year later, a few days after assuring her husband that her mind was “in a state of peace,” Polly died. “And, oh the goodness, the mercy of Lord! He prepared me for it, he supported me under it,” John wrote to a friend. He preached Polly’s funeral service from Habakkuk 3:17–18: “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.” A few years later, John published *Letters to a Wife*, a collection of his letters to Polly, as a way to thank God for her, honor her memory, and demonstrate a Christ-centered marriage.

John lived for another seventeen years, using his seasonal vacations from the pulpit to travel and preach in other churches. As his health declined, his adopted daughter, Betsy, cared for him with the help of three aging servants whom John regarded as family. In 1801, Betsy suffered a bout with depression and had to be hospitalized. John passed her window and waved to her every morning. With care and John’s constant prayer, Betsy was soon well enough to be released. A few years later, she married. John, now eighty years old, was too frail to perform the ceremony, but continued preaching, saying, “Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?”

John gave his last sermon in October of 1806. The following February, with failed eyesight and memory, he received momentous news: William Wilberforce’s bill for the abolition of the slave trade had passed by an overwhelming majority.

“I am packed and sealed and waiting for the post,” John told one of his visitors in the last few months of his life. On December 21, 1807, John Newton knew the reality of the words he had written 35 years earlier:

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.