

IN HIS OWN WORDS

John Newton's Experience of God's Amazing Grace



Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now I'm found
T'was blind but now I see.

So begins the familiar hymn, *Amazing Grace*, one of over 250 hymns written by John Newton (1725-1807). But how did this blasphemer and slave ship master come to experience God's marvelous grace? And how might such a one as I? In the following selections from Newton's spiritual autobiography, he tells us in his own words.

YOUTHFUL DAYS – ACTIVE CONSCIENCE

My mother, as I have heard from many, was a pious, experienced Christian.... I was her only child.... Almost her whole employment was the care of my education....

[Prior to her death shortly before my seventh birthday], she stored my memory, which was then very retentive, with many valuable pieces, chapters, and portions of Scriptures, catechisms, hymns and poems.... Though in the process of time I sinned away all the advantages of these early impressions, yet they were for a great while a restraint upon me. They returned again and again, and it was very long before I could wholly shake them off. When the Lord at length opened my eyes, I found a great benefit from the recollection of them.

My father was at sea [at the time of my mother's death]; he was a commander in the Mediterranean trade. He came home the following year, and soon after married again, and I passed into different hands. I was well treated [but] the loss of my mother's instructions was not repaired. I was now permitted to mingle with careless and profane children, and soon began to learn their ways.

When I was eleven years old my father took me to sea with him.... From that time to the year 1742 I made several voyages In this period, my temper and conduct were exceedingly various. I had little concern about religion, and easily received very ill impressions. However, I was often disturbed with convictions.... [Hence], I began to pray, to read the Scriptures, and to keep a diary.

I was presently religious in my own eyes. But, alas! this seeming goodness had no solid foundation, but passed away like the morning-cloud, or the early dew. I was soon weary, gradually gave it up, and became worse than before. Instead of prayer, I learned to curse and blaspheme, and was exceedingly wicked when not under my parent's view.... I saw the necessity of religion as a means of escaping hell, but I loved sin, and was unwilling to forsake it.... I did not as yet turn out profligate, but I was making large

strides towards total apostasy from God.... [Eventually,] I met with companions who completed the ruin of my principles. I affected¹ to talk of virtue, and was not so outwardly abandoned as afterward, yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness.

DARING SINNER -- DYING CONSCIENCE

[After the passing of some years], my life, when awake, was a course of most horrid impiety and profaneness. I know not that I had ever since met so daring a blasphemer. Not content with common oaths and imprecations, I daily invented new ones. ... I was sold to do iniquity, and delighted in mischief. ...

The admonitions of conscience, which from successive repulses² had grown weaker and weaker, at length entirely ceased. For a space of many months, if not for some years, I cannot recollect that I had a single check of that sort. At times I have been visited with sickness, and have believed myself near to death, but I had not the least concern about the consequences. I seemed to have every mark of final impenitence and rejection; neither judgments nor mercies made the least impression on me. ...

TROUBLED CONSCIENCE -- DREADED FUTURE

On March 9 [1748], the day before our catastrophe, I carelessly took up Stanhope's Thomas a Kempis³ as I had often done before, to pass away the time. ... However, while I was reading this time an involuntary suggestion arose in my mind: What if these things should be true? I

¹ pretended

² continued resistance

³ Thomas a Kempis' book *The Imitation of Christ*, which English clergyman George Stanhope translated into English

could not bear the force of the inference as it related to myself, therefore shut the book presently. My conscience witnessed against me once more, and I concluded that, true or false, I must abide the consequences of my own choice. ...

But now *the Lord's time was come*, and the conviction I was so unwilling to receive was deeply impressed upon me. I went to bed that night in my usual security and indifference but was awakened from a sound sleep by the force of a violent sea, which broke upon us. Much of it came down below and filled the cabin where I lay with water. This alarm was followed by a cry from the deck that the ship was going down

Taking in all circumstances, it was astonishing, and almost miraculous, that any of us survived. We had immediate recourse to the pumps, but the water increased against all our efforts. ... We used most of our clothes and bedding to stop the leaks [and to another suggestion for shoring up the ship], I said, almost without any meaning, "If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us!" ... I was instantly struck with my own words. As Jehu⁴ said once, "What hast thou to do with peace?" so it directly occurred, What mercy can there be for me? ... Indeed, I expected that every time the vessel descended into the sea, she would rise no more. I dreaded death now, and my heart foreboded the worst, if the Scriptures, which I had long since opposed, were true.

INEVITABLE DOOM -- EMERGING HOPE

March 12 is a day to be remembered by me. ... On that day the Lord sent from on high and delivered me out of deep waters. ... Not being able to pump, I went to the

⁴ An Old Testament king (see II Kings 9:18,19)

helm, and steered the ship till midnight. . . . I had here leisure and opportunity to think of my former religious professions, the calls, the warnings, the deliverances I had met with, the licentious course of my life, particularly my unparalleled effrontery in making the gospel the subject of profane ridicule. . . . I concluded at first that my sins were too great to be forgiven. The Scriptures seemed to say the same. I had formerly been well acquainted with the Bible, and many passages upon this occasion returned to my memory, particularly those awful passages, Proverbs 1:24-31, Hebrews 6:4-6 and II Peter 2:20 I waited with fear and impatience to receive my inevitable doom. . . .

When I . . . heard about six in the evening that the ship was freed from water, there arose a gleam of hope. I thought I saw the hand of God displayed in our favor and I began to pray. I could not utter the prayer of faith My prayer was like the cry of ravens, which yet the Lord does not disdain to hear. I now began to think of that Jesus whom I had so often derided. I recollected the particulars of His life and of His death - a death for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him. And now I chiefly wanted evidence. . . .

ADDRESSING DOUBT-- AWAKENING FAITH

The great question now was how . . . I should gain an assurance that the Scriptures were of divine inspiration, and a sufficient warrant for the exercise of trust and hope in God. One of the first helps I received, in . . . examining the New Testament more carefully, was from Luke 11:13⁵. . . . [H]ere I found a Spirit spoken of, which was to be commu-

⁵ "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."

nicated to those who ask it. I reasoned thus: If this book is true, the promise in this passage is true likewise. I have need of that very Spirit by which the whole was written, in order to understand it. He has promised here to give that Spirit to those who ask, I must therefore pray, and if it is of God, He will make good His own word. My purposes were [further] strengthened by [taking to heart] John 7:17.⁶

... [Also], in perusing the New Testament, I was struck with several passages ... but particularly the prodigal (Luke 15). I thought the prodigal had never been so exemplified as by myself. The goodness of the father in receiving, nay, in running to meet such a son, as an illustration of the Lord's goodness to returning sinners, gained upon me.

I continued in prayer; the Lord had interposed so far to save me, and I hoped He would do more. ... 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 and its exact suitableness to all my needs. I saw that God might declare not only His mercy but also His justice in the pardon of sins on account of the obedience and sufferings of Jesus Christ. By that time I embraced the sublime doctrine of "God manifest in the flesh, reconciling the world to Himself."⁷

... I stood in need of an Almighty Saviour, and such an one I found described in the New Testament. The Lord had wrought a marvelous thing: I was no longer an infidel. I heartily renounced my former profaneness, was seriously disposed, and sincerely touched with a sense of underserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dan-

⁶ "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself."

⁷ see II Corinthians 5:19

gers; I was sorry for my past misspent life and purposed an immediate reformation; I was freed from the habit of swearing which seemed to have been deeply rooted in me as a second nature. To all appearance, I was a new man.

DISCOVERING DEPRAVITY - LEARNING DEPENDENCY

I cannot doubt that this change, so far as it prevailed, was wrought by the Spirit and power of God, yet I was greatly deficient in many respects. In some degree, I sensed my more enormous sins, but I was little aware of the innate evils of my heart. I had no appreciation of the spirituality and extent of the law of God. The hidden life of a Christian, that of communion with God by Jesus Christ, and dependence on Him for hourly supplies of wisdom, strength, and comfort, was a mystery of which I had as yet no knowledge. 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 had no Christian friend or faithful minister to advise me that my strength was no more than my righteousness. ... I was not brought in the way of evangelical preaching ... until six years later. ... I could no more make a mock at sin, or jest with holy things; I no more questioned the truth of Scripture, or quenched the rebukes of conscience. I consider this as the beginning of my return to God, or rather His return to me, but I cannot consider myself to have been a believer in the full sense of the word till a considerable time afterward. ...

Who would not expect to hear, that after such a wonderful, unhoped for deliverance as I had received, and after my eyes were in some measure enlightened to see things aright, I should immediately cleave to the Lord and His ways ...? Alas! It was far otherwise with me. I had learned

to pray, I set some value upon the Word of God and was no longer a libertine, but my soul still cleaved to the dust. ... I began to grow slack in waiting upon the Lord. I grew vain and trifling in my conversation. Though my heart smote me often, my armor was gone, and I declined fast. ... I seemed to have forgotten all the Lord's mercies. Profaneness excepted, I was almost as bad as before. The enemy prepared a train of temptations, and I became his easy prey. For about a month, he lulled me asleep in a course of evil, of which a few months before, I could not have supposed myself any longer capable. ...

I was now fast bound in chains; I had little desire, and no power at all to free myself. I would at times reflect how it was with me, but if I attempted to struggle, it was in vain. ... By the remembrance of this interval, the Lord has often reminded me what a poor creature I am in myself, incapable of standing a single hour without continual fresh supplies of strength and grace from the fountain-head.

INFINITE MERCY -- WHOLEHEARTED TRUST

At length the Lord, whose mercies are infinite, interposed on my behalf ... to save me. He visited me with a violent fever, which ... once more brought me to myself. But oh, what a prospect! My past dangers and deliverances, my earnest prayers in the time of trouble, my solemn vows before the Lord at His table, and my ungrateful returns for all His goodness were all brought to my mind at once. I began to wish that the Lord had suffered me to sink into the ocean when I first besought His mercy. For a little while I concluded the door of hope to be shut; but this continued not long. Weak and almost delirious ... I found a renewed liberty to pray. I made no more resolves, but cast myself before the Lord to do with me as He should please.

[As] I was enabled to hope and believe in a crucified Saviour, the burden was removed from my conscience, and not only my peace, but my health was restored, I cannot say instantaneously, but I recovered from that hour. ... From that time, I trust I have been delivered from the power and dominion of sin: though, as to the effects and conflicts of sin dwelling in me, I still “groan, being burdened.” I now began to wait upon the Lord. Though I have often grieved His Spirit and foolishly wandered from Him since ..., His powerful grace has preserved me from such black declensions as this I have last recorded.

... [Humbly trusting in His mercy and promises, that He would guard and guide me to the end], the Lord was gracious to my weakness, and did not suffer the enemy to prevail against me. I was gradually led to see the inconvenience and folly of one thing after another, and when I saw it the Lord strengthened me to give it up. But it was some years before I was delivered from occasional compliance in many things which at this time I do not allow myself.

DISCIPLESHIP DESIRED -- SECURITY REALIZED

For about the space of six years, the Lord was pleased to lead me in a secret way. I had learned something of the evil of my heart; I had read the Bible over and over with several good books, and had a general view of gospel truths; but my conceptions were, in many respects, confused, not having in all this time met with one acquaintance who could answer my inquiries.

Upon my arrival at St. Christopher's this voyage, I found a captain of a ship from London, whose conversation was greatly helpful to me. He was a man of experience in the things of God, and of a lively communicative turn. ...

For nearly a month we spent every evening together on board each other's ship alternately I was all ear; he not only increased my understanding, but his teaching warmed my heart. He encouraged me to open my mouth in social prayer; he taught me the advantage of Christian conversation; he put me upon an attempt to make my profession more public, and to venture to speak for God.

From him, rather from the Lord by him, I received an increase of knowledge; my conceptions became clearer and more evangelical; and I was delivered from a fear which had long troubled me - the fear of relapsing into my former apostasy. Now I began to understand the security of the covenant of grace, and to expect to be preserved, not by my own power and holiness, but by the mighty power and promise of God, through faith in an unchangeable Saviour. He likewise gave me a general view of the errors and controversies of the times ... and finally directed me where to apply in London for further instruction.

DETERMINED TO KNOW -- DISPOSED TO SERVE

Determined "to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified," I resolved to pursue nothing but in subservience to this main purpose. ...

I thought I was, above most living, a fit person to proclaim that faithful saying, that "Jesus Christ came into the world to save the chief of sinners." As my life was full of remarkable turns, and I seemed selected to show what the Lord could do, I had some hope that perhaps sooner or later He might call me into his service. ...

It is sufficient that He knows how to dispose of me, and that He both can and will do what is best. To Him I com-

mand myself. I trust that His will and my true interest are inseparable. To His Name be glory.

In the year he published his autobiography, John Newton was called by God into pastoral ministry. As for his now public conversion story, he knew some would say that he was very eager to persuade himself into belief of the Christian gospel. His response: "I confess I was; and so would they be, if the Lord should show them, as He was pleased to show me at that time, the absolute necessity of some expedient to interpose between a righteous God and a sinful soul. In the gospel I saw at least a per-adventure of hope, but on every other side I was surrounded with black, unfathomable despair."

When facing death's rigid jaws and God's righteous judgment, Newton discovered the only place of hope to be "the gospel of God's **grace**" (Acts 20:24). It was there he found that indispensable someone to interpose - the "one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (I Tim 2:5). Scripture tells us the Son of God, Jesus Christ, became a man "that he by the **grace** of God should taste death for every man" (Heb 2:9). We all have sinned, and "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23) - indeed, "the second death" (Rev 20:15). "Christ died for our sins" (I Cor 15:3). God's sinless Son "bare our sins in his own body on the tree" (I Pet 2:24). In our place, as our substitute, He "suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God" (I Pet 3:18). He made possible "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his **grace**" (Eph 1:7); now we through faith may be "justified freely by his **grace** through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24). "For by **grace** are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the

gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph 2:8-10). Truly, "Salvation is of the LORD" (Jon 2:9). *His* workmanship are we, wrought from the very beginning "by **grace**" (Rom 11:5-6).

Has the LORD shown you *your* need of His grace — of His one mediator, His Son Jesus — to save you from sin's power and penalty? The Bible warns, "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb 9:27). After God takes away life, He has the "power to cast into hell" (Lk 12:5). So says the crucified, resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. Friend, do not dismiss His words and wait until it is too late to do what John Newton did. Repent, and believe the gospel today by fixing your hope upon God's amazing grace. Newton said, "My trust, though weak in degree, was fixed upon the blood and righteousness of Jesus." Thereafter God freed him from sin's dominion and fashioned him into a sincere disciple. As it was for Newton, so may it be for you; for Jesus "is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:25).

-- from *John Newton: Out of the Depths - An Autobiography*
Moody Press edition of *The Authentic Narrative* [PD]
-- heading arrangements added

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B2103

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