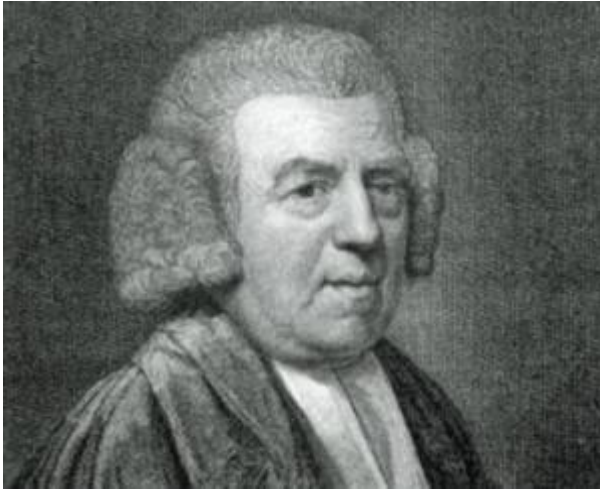


The story of “Amazing Grace”



In 1725, Newton was born in Wapping, a district in London. His father was a shipping merchant who was brought up as a Catholic but had Protestant sympathies, and his mother was a devout Independent unaffiliated with the Anglican Church. She had intended Newton to become a clergyman, but she died of

tuberculosis when he was six years old. For the next few years, Newton was raised by his emotionally distant stepmother while his father was at sea, and spent some time at a boarding school where he was mistreated. At the age of eleven, he joined his father on a ship as an apprentice; his seagoing career would be marked by headstrong disobedience.

As a youth, Newton began a pattern of coming very close to death, examining his relationship with God, then relapsing into bad habits. As a sailor, he denounced his faith after being influenced by a shipmate who discussed *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* with him. In a series of letters he later wrote, “Like an unwary sailor who quits his port just before a rising storm, I renounced the hopes and comforts of the Gospel at the very time when every other comfort was about to fail me.” His disobedience caused him to be pressed into the Royal Navy, and he took advantage of opportunities to overstay his leave and finally deserted to visit Mary “Polly” Catlett, a family friend with whom he had fallen in love. After enduring humiliation for deserting, he managed to get himself traded to a slave ship where he began a career in slave trading.

Newton often openly mocked the captain by creating obscene poems and songs about him that became so popular the crew

began to join in. He entered into disagreements with several colleagues that resulted in his being starved almost to death, imprisoned while at sea and chained like the slaves they carried, then outright enslaved and forced to work on a plantation in Sierra Leone. After several months he came to think of Sierra Leone as his home, but his father intervened after Newton sent him a letter describing his circumstances, and a ship found him by coincidence Newton claimed the only reason he left was because of Polly.

While aboard the ship *Greyhound*, Newton gained notoriety for being one of the most profane men the captain had ever met. In a culture where sailors commonly used oaths and swore, Newton was admonished several times for not only using the worst words the captain had ever heard, but creating new ones to exceed the limits of verbal debauchery. In March 1748, while the *Greyhound* was in the North Atlantic, a violent storm came upon the ship that was so rough it swept overboard a crew member who was standing where Newton had been moments before. After hours of the crew emptying water from the ship and expecting to be capsized, Newton and another mate tied themselves to the ship's pump to keep from being washed overboard, working for several hours. After proposing the measure to the captain, Newton had turned and said, "**If this will not do, then Lord have mercy upon us!**" Newton rested briefly before returning to the deck to steer for the next eleven hours. During his time at the wheel he pondered his divine challenge.

About two weeks later, the battered ship and starving crew landed in Lough Swilly, Ireland. For several weeks before the storm, Newton had been reading *The Christian's Pattern*, a summary of the 15th-century *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. The memory of the uttered phrase in a moment of desperation did not leave him; he began to ask if he was worthy of God's mercy or in any way redeemable as he had not only neglected his faith but directly opposed it, mocking

others who showed theirs, deriding and denouncing God as a myth. He came to believe that God had sent him a profound message and had begun to work through him. Newton's conversion was not immediate, but he contacted Polly's family and announced his intentions to marry her. Her parents were hesitant as he was known to be unreliable and impetuous. They knew he was profane, but they allowed him to write to Polly, and he set to begin to submit to authority for her sake.

He sought a place on a slave ship bound for Africa, and Newton and his crewmates participated in most of the same activities he had written about before; the only immorality from which he was able to free himself was profanity. After a severe illness his resolve was renewed, yet he retained the same attitude towards slavery as was held by his contemporaries. Newton continued in the slave trade through several voyages where he sailed up rivers in Africa—now as a captain—procured slaves being offered for sale in larger ports, and subsequently transported them to North America. In between voyages, he married Polly in 1750 and he found it more difficult to leave her at the beginning of each trip. After three shipping experiences in the slave trade, Newton was promised a position as ship's captain with cargo unrelated to slavery when, at the age of thirty, he collapsed and never sailed again.

Working as a customs agent in Liverpool starting in 1756, Newton began to teach himself Latin, Greek, and theology. He and Polly immersed themselves in the church community, and Newton's passion was so impressive that his friends suggested he become a priest in the Church of England. He was turned down by the Bishop of York in 1758, ostensibly for having no university degree, although the more likely reasons were his leanings toward evangelism. Newton continued his devotions, and after being encouraged by a friend, he wrote about his experiences in the slave trade and his conversion. The Earl of Dartmouth, impressed with his story, sponsored Newton for ordination with the Bishop of Lincoln, and offered him the

curacy of Olney, Buckinghamshire, in 1764.

Olney was a village of about 2,500 residents whose main industry was making lace by hand. The people were mostly illiterate and many of them were poor. Newton's preaching was unique in that he shared many of his own experiences from the pulpit; many clergy preached from a distance, not admitting any intimacy with temptation or sin. He was involved in his parishioners' lives and was much loved, although his writing and delivery were sometimes unpolished. But his devotion and conviction were apparent and forceful, and he often said his mission was to "break a hard heart and to heal a broken heart." The lyrics to "Amazing Grace" were written in late 1772 and probably used in a prayer meeting for the first time on January 1, 1773.

Here's one of the most popular pieces of music in the world today!