

## John Newton

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About the middle of the last century, there was living, in an islet on the western coast of Africa (Yawry Bay, near Sierra Leone), a poor white man, in the miserable condition of a servant to a dealer in negro slaves.

His lot was a hard one, compared even with that of the negroes whom he tended. He was often an object of pity—sometimes of scorn—to the poor black creatures (themselves the prey of the horrid hunters) who were passing through his master's hands as mere articles of merchandise.

But his hard lot fell to him as the result of his own wickedness. He had been a common sailor on board a man-of-war bound for the East Indies, but had been transferred, at his own request, to another ship, sailing to the coast of Guinea. Here he obtained his discharge, and entered the service in which we find him—an example of unusual folly and impiety, and a willing slave in Satan's bondage.

At one time he was on the very verge of death—left, without a draught of water, in a raging fever. At another, when the fever had abated, weak and hungry, he was ready to perish from want of food, and was glad to steal and devour the most unwholesome roots, and the meanest refuse of his master's table. And at all times—in the tropical rains, or under the solar blaze—he was almost destitute of clothing or of shelter.

Hated and despised by a negro mistress, and generally (even by the poor pagans amongst whom he herded) regarded as a monster of evil, he cherished the fiercest hatred and rage against those who ill-treated him. He was even urged on to conceive the most horrible designs of revenge, regardless of consequences which must have followed their perpetration. One thought alone restrained him from his meditated purpose—save as he was held back by the hand of a gracious Providence, of which, at the time, he knew nothing, nor desired to know. It was an early affection, strangely cherished in all his wanderings, in reference to one whom he had left in the land of his birth. She was his idol; and, while ignorant of God and His truth, he would have thought nothing too hard that could have secured his union with this object of his fond regard. Strange, that in a mind so filled with malignity, there should still be left a single sentiment of good!

Nor was this course of evil new to him. In the vessel he had left he

was a degraded man. He had been pressed into the navy, through his own imprudence, while in the merchant-service with his father, and, it being on the eve of an expected war, he could not obtain his discharge; yet, through the kind influence of friends, who had hitherto borne with him for his father's sake, he was called to the quarter-deck as a midshipman. The captain befriended him also, on their account, and the officers received him kindly; but such was his folly and obstinacy that, in order to avoid a five years' absence from the idol of his romantic but passionate regard, he betrayed a trust, and rashly deserted from his ship when out on duty.

As might be expected, he was quickly re-taken, tried and flogged, and degraded to the lowest rank of service in the vessel.

This disgrace could not be shaken off, although at times he felt it to be intolerable. Yet the thought of being torn away from the object of his fond desire was the sting of all his distresses. In his own words, written many years afterwards, "No case, except that of a conscience wounded by the wrath of God, could be more dreadful than mine."

If it be thought that conscience would now rebuke or restrain him, it would appear from his own account that he had, at least for a long and dreary interval, completely mastered and stifled that inward monitor. Thus he ran on in sin without remorse, and gave himself up to all ungodliness; and it was a relief to the captain to get rid of such a man, who, even in those times, exceeded the rest of the crew in wickedness. He was therefore (with another) exchanged at Madeira into the African ship, and afterwards, by his own choice, left in wretched servitude at the Slave Coast, like an outcast from the society of men.

## **II.**

Such was John Newton at the age of twenty-one; and such was his condition when, at his father's request, the captain of another Guinea ship undertook to seek him, and, if possible, to bring him back to England. So inured had he become both to his sins and his degradation, that he began at last to delight in his vile employment, and was ready to fix his abode amongst the black savages and the more savage whites.

To all human appearance, such a case would be hopeless. Reformation was improbable in the highest degree; restoration seemed impossible. But things which are impossible with men are possible with God. All his blasphemies had not exhausted the long-suffering of the Lord, nor had his abounding iniquities surpassed the much more abundant mercies of our God. The turning-point of his mad career was now at hand; and, led by a train of circumstances which, if not miraculous, are

truly wonderful, he will soon be seen on his way home, under the discipline of a wise and gracious hand, and learning, from the very rudiments, the knowledge of the things of God. His employments had located him for a time at a station far up the stream of a river (The River Kittam), whose course lies very near to the margin of the ocean. Here, while collecting the horrid merchandise of human beings from the interior of the country, it was usual to cross the ridge of land that lies between the river and the sea, to look out for passing ships, with which they might drive their nefarious trade.

"In February, 1747," writes Mr. Newton, "my fellow-servant, walking down to the beach, saw a vessel sailing past, and made a smoke in token of trade. She was already a little beyond the place, and, as the wind was fair, the captain was in some demur whether to stop or not; however, had my companion been half an hour later, she would have been gone beyond recal." This proved to be the very ship referred to. The captain had made inquiry for him at Sierra Leone, and at the Bananas; but, finding he was at a great distance, had given up the search. Here, however, he resumed his inquiries, and having thus unexpectedly found him out, he came on shore himself to deliver his message. "Had an invitation from home reached me," says Mr. Newton, "when I was sick and starving at the Plantanes, I should have received it as life from the dead. But now—I heard it at first with indifference!"

The captain, however, not willing to leave him behind, invented a series of plausible statements (not one of them true), which, joined with the possibility of once more seeing—perhaps of gaining—the idol of his heart, at length induced him to accept his father's invitation to return. "And thus," he adds, "I was suddenly freed from a captivity of about fifteen months. I had neither a thought nor desire for this change one hour before it took place! I embarked with him, and, in a few hours, lost sight of Kittam."

This happened just on the point of an intended inland expedition. One day later, and the slave-dealer had gone away from that place! One hour later, and the ship had been far on her cruise without him! And the inquiries of the captain for the long-lost prodigal at any other point had been all in vain.

Such are the mysterious ways of the providence and grace of God! The unbeliever may not discern them; the scoffer will deny them—as John Newton himself did in these the days of his ignorance; but if, like him, he be brought to his right mind, he will stand amazed at the loving kindness of the Lord. "Oh, that men would praise the Lord for his

goodness and for his wonderful works to the children of men! For he hath broken the gates of brass, and cut the bars of iron in sunder." (Psalm cvii. 15,16)

### III.

From this remarkable turning-point of his life began a fresh series of trials, which, by slow degrees, awakened him to a sense of shame and contrition, and eventually led him to the knowledge and belief of the truth. Still it was not without a long and painful struggle that his pride and unbelief gave way. Neither could he put away his evil doings. But a ray of light divine at length pierced the darkness of his heart, and this ray was never after wholly quenched.

Conscience, the inexorable minister of justice to a guilty soul, now renewed its office in John Newton's heart. The bold blasphemer, at times, would tremble at the remembrance of his sins; and it is no small wonder that he was not overwhelmed with despair. The ship in which he had embarked had a long voyage before her, and this, by unforeseen events, became more lengthened still. The weather proved unpropitious; and, from her protracted wear and tear in the tropical heats, she became little better than a wreck before she reached her long-desired port. Her stock of provisions, also, was so nearly exhausted, that those on board were reduced to the lowest daily allowance.

When Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord in the ship of Tarshish (Jonah i. 3), the sea wrought and was tempestuous, until the disobedient prophet was taken, by lot, and cast into the sea. No lot was needed in the present case to find out the guilty rebel: he was plainly spoken of as another Jonah. The troubles of the voyage were attributed to the presence of such a notorious sinner in the ship; and, if the purpose were not seriously entertained, it was often talked of among the crew, of casting him overboard, as the only means of saving the ship and their own lives. Time after time death seemed to him inevitable, and "after this the judgment." (Hebrews ix. 27)

Yet it was not so much by terror as by hope that he was at last led back—a wandering sheep—to the Good Shepherd. In his uttermost distress truths came to his remembrance which had been taught him by his mother in his early days—truths which his long course of impiety and his atheistical speculations had seemingly obliterated from his memory. Now, as from a long, deep slumber, they revived; and, like morning after a night of storms, or the haven to a foundering ship, his doubts and his terrors gave way to a belief in the truth of God, and a

hope of salvation by Jesus Christ.

#### IV.

John Newton, like many another who has trodden the path of the prodigal son, had once known the tender care and teaching of a pious mother. His mind had been early stored with religious principles, and he was oftentimes awakened to their solemn importance. In his youthful days he openly professed to choose the Lord and His service. But his ardour cooled again, and he became careless and vicious. His mother died in 1732, and he was cast among strangers who knew not the fear of God. The evils of an unrenewed nature grew and strengthened with his growth, and overpowered his frequent resolutions to amend his ways and lead a better life. "I took up and laid aside a religious profession three or four times before I was sixteen years of age; but all this time my heart was insincere. I often saw the necessity of religion as a means of escaping hell; but I loved sin, and was unwilling to forsake it." Such are his own words when afterwards referring to this part of his life, and in this his case is by no means singular.

Many a fond Christian mother has rejoiced in the early profession of a beloved son, but has lived to see the morning cloud pass away, the early dew evaporate, and her hopes blighted by a long course of sin and folly. But a mother's faith and tears are not vain things. John Newton could testify that the prayers and instructions of his mother were the last good impressions to be got rid of, and the first to reappear. Parental expectations may, like the winter sun, seem to go down at noon; but faith and prayer are never-failing resources to a Christian, even in the darkest hours of parental anxiety.

But, on the other hand, let not the example of John Newton and of the abounding grace that saved him—that can save the chief of sinners—let not this give boldness to the wandering prodigal or to the impenitent backslider. God's ways are not our ways, nor His mercy limited according to our weak thoughts; yet it is written in the Book of Truth—"He that, being often reprov'd, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy." (Proverbs xxix. 1)

#### V.

How little could the mother of John Newton anticipate the fearful course that opened to her wilful and ungrateful child! Left motherless at the age of seven, he soon became entangled in the snares of vice. For a short period he was sent to school; but, in 1736, when about the age of eleven, he went with his father to sea, where his corrupt nature

found room for rapid development; so that, after about six years spent in various voyages, he was ripening into early manhood with no right principle—no fear of God—to guide his steps; but, in their stead, a reckless love of sin, and a defiance of all restraint upon his passions and his acts.

It was at this period of his life, during a casual visit, that he formed that strange and romantic attachment to the daughter of his mother's friend, an impression that was never effaced from his heart. He had been engaged to go out to Jamaica, at that time a promising field of enterprise for a young man, but, fascinated by this new passion, he purposely lingered until the ship had sailed without him.

"She was the *occasion*" says Mr. Newton, "though not the *cause*, of that course of foolish conduct on my part which plunged me into the misery of African bondage; and when I was there I was so infatuated and degraded in my spirit, so rivetted to my chains, that I think nothing but the attachment I felt for her could have induced me to return."

Thus, for her sake, he neglected opportunities of honourable occupation, became the prey of the press-gang, deserted from his ship when on duty, incurred the greatest disgrace, endured the direst miseries, and at length gladly embraced the alternative of a half-savage life in Africa! Yet all this time he was following a course of life which rendered this, or any other honourable union, all but impossible. It appears from his own account that this inconsistency never forsook him until, in his homeward voyage, he was led as a sinner to the cross.

In a review of his life, at an after period, he writes thus to a friend:—"How industriously is Satan served!...Not content with running the broad way myself, I was indefatigable in enticing others; and had my influence been equal to my wishes, I would have carried all the human race with me. ...When I think of the most with whom I spent my unhappy days of ignorance, I am ready to say, 'I only am escaped alone to tell thee.' ...The Lord cut me short of opportunities, and placed me where I could do but little mischief; but had my abilities and occasions been equal to my heart, I should have been a Voltaire and a Tiberius in one character—a monster of profaneness and licentiousness. 'Oh! to grace how great a debtor!'"

Our story leads us on to trace some of the wondrous ways of Infinite Love—Love that could so long bear with such a sinner as John Newton, and that could transform him into a child of grace—Love already opening the way for the prodigal's return, and going out to meet and receive him.

## VI.

While slowly tracking his homeward passage in the trading ship—from port to port in Africa and America—much of his time was spent in extravagant folly and madness. Once, in the midst of a night-carouse with the sailors, the wind blew his cap into the sea. Inflamed with ardent spirits, he was actually leaping over the ship's side to recover it, imagining there was a boat suspended within his reach. And once, in the pursuit of game, he got bewildered in the depths of an African forest. Night overtook him; wild beasts prowled around him, and for awhile he was unable to find his way back to the ship. In these and other circumstances of imminent peril, he was as often rescued by Divine power and mercy from temporal and eternal death; but even these deliverances left no sensible impression on his still callous heart.

In Mark ix. is given the history of a poor demoniac, whom the disciples in their Master's absence could not cure. Often had the evil spirit "cast him into the fire and into the waters to destroy him." When Jesus himself came near, "straight way the spirit tare him, and he fell on the ground, and wallowed, foaming." So, after the Lord had rebuked him, there was a fierce struggle, even in the very act of deliverance—"And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him. And he was as one dead." Not without a struggle will Satan lose his prey. The case of John Newton bears a strong resemblance to this, and nothing but the power of Jesus could rescue him.

In March, 1748, after leaving the banks of Newfoundland, the ship sustained so much damage during a violent gale, that all hope of making land was for a season gone. Then the thought of eternal things thrilled with a force he could not resist. His crimes rose up against him, and conscience *would* be heard. Then, also, his infidel philosophy failed him, and a reluctant conviction of the truth fastened in his mind.

In his own words, referring to this important season—"I began to think of my former religious professions, the extraordinary turns of my life, the calls, the warnings, and deliverances I had met with, the licentious course of my conversation, particularly my unparalleled effrontery in making the Gospel history the constant subject of profane ridicule. I thought there never was, or could be, such a sinner as myself; and then—comparing the advantages I had broken through—I concluded that my sins were too great to be forgiven. The Scriptures, likewise, seemed to say the same; for I had formerly been well acquainted with the Bible, and many passages returned upon my memory, particularly those awful passages—Proverbs i. 24-31 ("Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye

have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity: I will mock when your fear cometh. ...Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me," &c.), Hebrews vi. 4-6 ("For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, ...if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance," &c.), and 2 Peter ii. 20 ("For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world, ...they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning."); which seemed so exactly to suit my case and character, as to bring with them a presumptive proof of a divine original."

But his estimate of his own sad case was still far from adequate. He adds—"It was not till after I had gained some clear views of the infinite righteousness and grace of Christ Jesus my Lord, that I had a deep and strong apprehension of my state by nature and practice; and perhaps, till then, I could not have borne the sight—so wonderfully does the Lord proportion the discoveries of sin and grace."

The mental process by which John Newton was delivered from his thralldom was like a long and doubtful warfare. Light had broken in upon his soul, yet darkness still had sway. The life, the sayings, and the person of Jesus became his study; but as yet he rather *wished* than *believed* the record to be true. The parable of the fig-tree (Luke xiii. 6-9) struck him; so did the case of Paul the Apostle; but, most of all, that of the prodigal son in the fifteenth of Luke. "I thought *that* had never been so nearly exemplified as by myself. And then, the goodness of the father in receiving, nay, in running to meet such a son. And this intended *only to illustrate* the Lord's goodness to returning sinners! Such reflections gaining upon me, I continued much in prayer. I saw that the Lord had interposed so far to save me, and I hoped He would do more. And sometimes I thought I could be content to die even for want of food, so I might but die a believer."

At this very time famine stared him in the face. The half of a salted cod was a day's allowance for twelve persons. They had no bread, hardly any clothes, and very cold weather. It was only by incessant labour at the pump that they could keep the ship above water; and their fears were even greater than their sufferings, for it was certain they could not hold out much longer.

At last he landed in the north of Ireland, to all appearance a new man. "I, was no longer an infidel; I heartily renounced my former profaneness, 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 mis-spent life, and purposed an immediate reformation."

In his earlier years, John Newton had repeatedly formed similar purposes of self-amendment. Perhaps the reader has done the same, and so, like him, has failed. Failure must follow every attempt of a sinner to render himself holy and pleasing to God by his own works.

But when his own resources fail him—when all his works, even the best of them, are seen and felt to be full of sin—then, as a *sinner* believing, he is "justified freely, by God's grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Rom. iii. 24)

Now he began, by slow degrees, to apprehend the way of faith. He believed that the *past* was forgiven by the infinite mercy of God in Christ, and he was thus preserved from falling back into his old sins.

It was his own case which he depicted, with so much force and beauty, in one of his hymns (Olney Hymns, Book ii., Hymn 57):—

"In evil long I took delight  
Unawed by shame or fear,  
Till a new object struck my sight,  
And stopp'd my wild career."

I saw One hanging on a tree,  
In agonies and blood,  
Who fix'd his languid eyes on me,  
As near his cross I stood.

"Sure never, till my latest breath,  
Can I forget that look;  
It seem'd to charge me with his death,  
Though not a word he spoke.

"My conscience felt and owned the guilt,  
And plunged me in despair;  
I saw my sins his blood had spilt,  
And helped to nail him there."

Alas! I knew not what I did!  
But now my tears are vain,  
Where shall my trembling soul be hid?  
For I the Lord have slain!

"A second look he gave, which said—  
I freely all forgive;  
This blood is for thy ransom paid,  
I die, that thou may'st live."

## VII.

About two years after his return he received the hand of Mary Catlett, the object of his long-cherished affection. She was, at this time, a stranger to the truth; but so deep and mutual was their regard, that, during many years, and through many vicissitudes of life, their union displayed a rare example of conjugal happiness; still more shining when *both* their hearts had been sanctified by the indwelling grace and power of the Holy Ghost.

After his marriage he received the command of a vessel in the African trade. He had previously made one voyage to the scenes of his former servitude and suffering; not as master—for which he deliberately judged himself unfit, until he had better learned to obey—but as mate; and it had been his business to go from place to place to purchase the slaves collected at the various coast-stations. We must remember that this was a hundred years ago, before we can understand how one, who had himself tasted so bitterly the hardship and degradation of the slave—how *he* could again take part in such scenes of woe, and that for *gain!*

True, such things were sanctioned by long and general usage, and scarcely a single voice—save the cry of the captive—had gone up against it. True, also, the master of the ship was now an altered man, both in mind and manners, carefully guarding every avenue of thought and action, lest temptation should bring him down again from his moral elevation. Yet, how imperfect were his views of Christian obligation at this time, and afterwards, appears from the mere fact of his engaging actively—though subordinately—in that traffic of tears and blood.

In the three voyages which he made during this period, he commenced afresh the study of the Latin tongue, of which he had barely acquired the rudiments in his school-days. At his new task he toiled very hard, under many disadvantages; but it was, perhaps, a healthy exercise for a mind so long unused to any wholesome discipline. In this curious combination of character—slave-master and classical student—he passed about six years, towards the end of which he became acquainted with Captain Clunie, a man of some experience and

knowledge in the things of God. From him, for the first time, Mr. Newton learned the value of Christian intercourse, and obtained directions where to seek the same privilege on his return to England, where he landed, from his last voyage, in August, 1754.

He had already begun to feel disgust with his present employment, and often prayed that some other way of life might be opened for him; but the answer was given in an unexpected manner.

### VIII.

Mr. Newton was within two days of sailing on another voyage, when he was suddenly seized with a fit of the apoplectic kind, from which, indeed, he soon recovered, but which left behind such symptoms as rendered it unsafe to proceed to sea. Thus he was preserved from a voyage which proved "extremely calamitous," and became for ever disengaged from his uncongenial business.

A new trial followed in the severe illness of Mrs. Newton, occasioned by the shock of his own sudden and alarming seizure; and it was long before she recovered. Meanwhile he formed some valuable Christian acquaintance in London, and also obtained, unsought, an appointment to the office of tide-waiter, at Liverpool.

In this new employment he found much leisure for reading and study, in the prosecution of which he laid aside his old favourite Latin authors, and devoted his whole attention to the Holy Scriptures, and a few choice Christian writers.

At length we find him re-united to his loved and loving wife, rejoicing to find her health restored, and to see in her the dawning of spiritual light—"the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor. iv. 6) Henceforward the story of the African Blasphemer becomes the story of a devoted Christian and servant of God.

Mr. Newton possessed a wonderful facility in illustrating Scripture narratives by his own experience. Like one of Joseph's brethren, trembling at the foot of his throne in Egypt, (Gen. xlv. xlv) he had found himself a conscience-smitten sinner at the feet of Jesus, expecting only to hear the awful sentence of the Judge—"Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire." (Matt. xxv. 41) How touching is the parallel completed in the following verses (Olney Hymns, Book i., Hymn 12):—

"But oh! what surprise when he spoke,

While tenderness beam'd in his face;  
My heart then to pieces he broke,  
O'erwhelmed and confounded by grace—  
'Poor sinner, I know thee full well;  
By thee I was sold and was slain:  
But I died to redeem thee from hell,  
And raise thee in glory to reign.

"I am Jesus, whom thou hast blasphemed,  
And crucified often afresh;  
But let me henceforth be esteem'd  
Thy brother, thy bone, and thy flesh.  
My pardon I freely bestow,  
Thy wants I will fully supply,  
I'll guide thee and guard thee below,  
And soon will remove thee on high.

"Go, publish to sinners around—  
That they may be willing to come,—  
The mercy which now thou hast found,  
And tell them that yet there is room.  
O sinners! the message obey,  
No more vain excuses pretend,  
But come, without farther delay,  
To Jesus, our brother and friend."

In the last stanza we perceive the desire springing up in his own mind to make known the grace of God, who had arrested him in his course of evil, and made him an example—not of wrath, but of mercy.

## **IX.**

From October, 1755, the course of Mr. Newton's life and circumstances ran remarkably smooth and uniform for several years. Living in the habit of prayer, and using diligently the talents he had received as a steward of the Lord, his profiting in knowledge and grace was rich and evident. In his daily business he was unmistakably a Christian, notwithstanding the reproach which, at that time, usually fell to the lot of those who were more godly than their neighbours. In his leisure hours he stored his mind with the knowledge of the things of God, from the precious treasures of the open Book. And in the rest of his time he was not backward to communicate to others what he had obtained so freely, or to seek, in Christian fellowship, the growth of his soul in love, and grace, and power.

In his private devotions he preferred, when practicable, to walk in the open air; a closet as wide as the horizon, and as lofty as the sky, was not too large for him, in his daily intercessions on behalf of those he knew and loved. Thus, in mental abstraction from earthly things, his prayers and praises went up to heaven; and thus, in the full assurance of faith, he often obtained the answer of peace.

Wonderful indeed was the transformation of his whole character and life!—from such a frightful course of impiety and rebellion to so rich and deep a sense of free and sovereign grace!—yielding no longer the bitter fruits of infidelity and vice, but the sweet enjoyments of righteousness and peace!

His present experience brought back to his remembrance a very remarkable dream which he had had many years before. It was during a voyage to Venice, in 1743, and deserves to be told in his own words:

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"The scene presented to my imagination was the harbour of Venice, where we had lately been. I thought it was night, and my watch upon the deck. As I was walking to and fro by myself, a person came to me and brought me a ring, with an express charge to keep it carefully, assuring me that, while I preserved that ring, I should be happy and successful; but if I lost or parted with it, I must expect nothing but trouble and misery. I accepted the present and the terms willingly, not in the least doubting my own care to preserve it, and highly satisfied to have my happiness in my own keeping.

"I was engaged in these thoughts when a second person came to me, and, observing the ring on my finger, took occasion to ask me some questions concerning it. I readily told him its virtues, and his answer expressed a surprise at my weakness in expecting such effects from a ring. I think he reasoned with me for some time upon the impossibility of the thing, and at length urged me, in direct terms, to throw it away. At first I was shocked at the proposal, but his insinuations prevailed; I began to reason and doubt of the matter myself, and, at last, plucked it off my finger and dropped it over the ship's side into the water. The same instant a terrible fire burst out from a range of mountains behind the city of Venice. I perceived, too late, my folly; and my tempter, with an air of insult, informed me that all the mercy God had in reserve for me was comprised in that ring, which I had wilfully thrown away. I understood that I must now go with him to the burning mountains, and that all the flames I saw were kindled upon my

account. I trembled, and was in great agony, so that it was surprising that I did not then awake.

"But my dream continued; and when I thought myself on the point of a constrained departure, self-condemned, without plea or hope, suddenly a third person came to me, and demanded the cause of my grief. I told him the plain case, confessing that I had ruined myself wilfully, and deserved no pity. He blamed my rashness, and asked if I should be wiser, supposing I had my ring again. I had not time to answer before I saw this unexpected friend go down under the water, and he soon returned bringing the ring with him.

"The moment he came on board the flames in the mountains were extinguished, and my seducer left me. Then was the prey taken from the hand of the mighty, and the lawful captive delivered. My fears were at an end, and with joy and gratitude I approached my kind deliverer to receive the ring again; but he refused to return it, and spoke to this effect—'If you should be entrusted with this ring again, you would very soon bring yourself into the same distress; you are not able to keep it, but I will preserve it for you, and, whenever it is needful, will produce it on your behalf.' Upon this, I awoke.

"A time came when I found myself in circumstances very nearly resembling those suggested by this extraordinary dream—when I stood, helpless and hopeless, upon the brink of an awful eternity. Had the eyes of my mind been then opened, I should have seen my grand enemy, who had seduced me, pleased with my agonies, and waiting to seize and bear away my soul to his place of torment. I should have seen Jesus, whom I had persecuted and defied, rebuking the adversary, challenging me for his own, as a brand plucked out of the fire, and saying, 'Deliver him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom!' However, though I saw not these things, I found the benefit—I obtained mercy. The Lord answered me in the day of my distress; and, blessed be His name, He who restored the ring vouchsafes to keep it! 'The Lord is my shepherd. I have been able to trust my all in His hands, and I know whom I have believed. Bless the Lord, O my soul!'"

## X.

During Mr. Newton's residence at Liverpool, his mind was drawn more strongly to the work of an evangelist. The extended revival of religion by the ministry of Wesley, Whitfield, and others, at this

period, seemed to invite the active co-operation of one who had tasted so freely the constraining love of Christ. At the same time, also, the judgment of his Christian friends—and they were not a few—urged him to embrace every opportunity of calling sinners to repentance.

The easier way to the stated exercise of this ministry appeared to be among the dissenters; but he had many reasons for preferring the Established Church. His first application for orders was, however, unsuccessful, and his earlier attempts at preaching were far from encouraging. His failures could not quench his desire to serve the Lord; but they led him to a deep and salutary searching of his heart and motives, which he has thus described:—

"I began to think my views to the ministry were presumptuous. I thought, at least, that if the Lord was pleased to accept my desire to serve Him, He would not accept my service, because I had been so vile a creature; as He accepted David's desire to build His house, but did not employ him because he had shed blood. And yet, notwithstanding all disappointments and discouragements, He was pleased at length to admit me into His vineyard. He put it into my heart to have a meeting for a few select friends, in my own house, on the Lord's Day evening, which I continued for about the last three years I lived at Liverpool; and in these exercises He was pleased, in some measure, to open my mouth."

"The hand of the diligent maketh rich." While apparently *waiting* for employment in the Lord's vineyard, he was already planting and watering; and he found himself greatly enriched thereby, in knowledge and utterance, and furnished for a wider field of action when the fit time should come.

In the copious use of his pen he found much profit and delight, and contributed largely to the benefit of others; especially by his inimitable hymns, and his very numerous and valuable letters, of which several volumes have been published.

The same Divine power that had interposed so many times in the days of his ignorance to preserve his life from destruction, still followed him in his daily official duties. One incident becomes all the more remarkable on account of his habitual punctuality. Detained by some business on a certain day, he came to his boat much later than usual. At length he went out to inspect a ship; but, just before he reached her, the ship blew up! Had he left the shore at his usual time, he must have perished in the explosion.

## **XI.**

Mr. Newton was now in his thirty-ninth year; and yet, like one born out of due time, he had only just begun to *live*. His long and useful career as a minister of the Established Church commenced with his ordination, which took place on the 29th of April, 1764. He entered, at the same time, on the curacy of Olney, in Buckinghamshire, where he preached his first sermon, from Psalm lxxx. 1—"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel! Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock: thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth!" He soon set to work in earnest, among both adults and children in his parish, and before long he began to see the fruit of his labour.

He adopted himself, and recommended to others, the extempore mode of preaching, though he was keenly sensible of the exercises and temptations attending it. But even these were not without their value to him, as the following extract from his letters will show:—

"Many exercises have I had about preaching, nor am I wholly without them still. ...To be an extempore preacher, with some degree of acceptance and popularity, is an ensnaring situation. It affords much ground for the workings of pride and self-complacency, and therefore it is a mercy if the Lord is pleased to give us frequent proofs of our own inability; notwithstanding what we can do when He puts forth His power in us.

However, I should tell you that, long after He had given me some liberty of speech at Olney ... my mouth was stopped again. That, is, my mind was so confused that I only talked nonsense; and I thought it my duty to tell the people I could not preach, because the Lord suspended His assistance. I therefore stopped, and told them so. When I had made this acknowledgment, I had liberty again, only I could not resume the subject I had been upon. But I spoke freely on what had happened; and perhaps it was one of our best opportunities. It was so to me. My pride was kept down, my mind perfectly composed; and I went home as easy as if the whole parish had admired my sermon."

A temptation of another kind soon occurred, but he discerned the snare, and escaped it. His stipend was only sixty pounds per annum—a much smaller sum than he had derived from his office at Liverpool. Now he had the offer of a wider sphere of service, a pleasanter situation near London, and greater emoluments. But he preferred, at this time, to remain at Olney amongst a loving people whom he loved, and to whom the Lord had made him useful. And he found no reason to regret his choice.



It was here he was made useful to the poet Cowper, whose shattered mind found solace and relief during a long residence at his parsonage. And it was here that his intercourse commenced with the Rev. Thomas Scott, of Aston Sandford, who received his first spiritual instruction from Mr. Newton, and who afterwards became so extensively useful by his writings. Here, also, he acquired many valuable friends, among whom was Mr. Thornton, of London, whose munificent bounty found in him one of the many channels through which it reached the hands of the deserving poor, and from whom he himself at length received the gift of a valuable and important charge in the city of London.

Mr. Newton remained curate of Olney more than fifteen years, but circumstances eventually arose which rendered a change desirable. At the same time the rectory of St. Mary, Woolnoth, was pressed on his acceptance by his friend, Mr. Thornton; and accordingly, in the year 1779, he removed to London, where, on the 19th of December, he took for his first text Eph. iv. 15, "Speaking the truth in love." A motto remarkably descriptive of his own ministrations.

## **XII.**

In the very heart of the city—then more populous than now—he brought into operation the same wise and systematic diligence which had marked his ministry in the country, but with redoubled care and circumspection. His church was surrounded by merchants and bankers, who were less accessible to the Gospel message than the poorer class of his parishioners; but he felt a solemn obligation laid upon him to seek the rich as well as the poor, that he might make full proof of his ministry. Accordingly, on the morning of the Lord's Day, he generally adapted his discourses to this class of his hearers, that he might, if possible, save some of them. In the evening his sermons were usually of a more popular kind, and seldom failed to attract a large auditory, from various parts of London, and of all denominations.

From this point our story must overleap many years of his greatest usefulness and popularity. His life and labours were but little varied in their character, but they were crowned with rich and abundant proofs of the Lord's grace, and eminently fruitful in blessing, both to saints and sinners.

We may here introduce a few of those brief occasional remarks and observations in which he often so happily conveyed important counsel or reproof, and presented truth in striking and familiar terms.

Referring one day to the frequent interruptions of a residence in London, he observed:—

"I seem to see in this world two heaps—of human happiness and human misery: now, if I can take but the smallest bit from one heap and add it to the other, I carry a point. When I hear a knock at my study-door, I hear a message from God; it may be a lesson of instruction; perhaps a lesson of patience; but, since it is His message, it must be interesting."

"His doctrine," observes Mr. Cecil, "was strictly that of the Church of England, urged on the consciences of men in the most practical and experimental manner. 'I hope,' said he one day to me, smiling, 'I hope I am, upon the whole, a Scriptural preacher; for I find I am considered as an *Arminian* among the high Calvinists, and as a *Calvinist* among the strenuous Arminians."

"What some call providential openings, are often powerful temptations. The heart, in wandering, cries, Here is a way opened before me; but, perhaps, not to be *trod*den, but *re*jected."

"My principal method of defeating heresy, is by establishing truth. One proposes to fill a bushel with tares; now, if I can fill it first with wheat, I shall defy his attempt."

"Apollos met with two candid people in the church: they neither ran away because he was legal, nor were they carried away because he was eloquent."

"When we first enter into the divine life, we propose to grow *rich*: God's plan is to make us feel *poor*."

"The man who drinks deep at the living streams will not thirst after other waters. When we behold Jesus and His love by the eye of faith, we may, with the prophet of old, sit down by a barren fig-tree and a failing crop, and still rejoice in the God of our salvation."

"Worldly men will be true to their principles; and if we were as true to ours, the visits between the two parties would be short and seldom."

"The Gospel is a proclamation of free mercy to guilty creatures—an act of grace to rebels. Now, though a rebel should throw away his pistols, and determine to go into the woods and make his mind better before he goes to court and pleads the act, he may, indeed, not be found in arms, yet, being taken in his reforming scheme, he will be hanged."

XIII.

Mr. Newton was now growing old in his Master's service. In preaching the Word—in pastoral intercourse with his parishioners—in friendly counsel to all who came to him, and these were many—and in correspondence with a large circle of friends—he was never idle, and his heart was in his work.

But his faith was not left untried. Domestic sorrows, one after another, fell with distressing weight upon him in his declining years. Nevertheless his faith, more precious than gold, came out of the crucible only the brighter and purer for the trials it endured, and reflected more and more the image of his absent Lord. Thus it shall "be found unto praise, and honour, and glory, at the appearing of Jesus Christ." 1 Peter i. 7.

In October, 1785, he was bereaved of a dear and lovely niece, whom he and Mrs. Newton had loved as a daughter. She fell asleep in Jesus in the fifteenth year of her age. Of Miss Cunningham's character and death Mr. Newton published a brief but interesting memoir.

A severer stroke now followed, which fell upon the tenderest sympathies of his loving nature. The idol of his heart was smitten! A small tumour in the breast—the effects of a blow received some years previously—began to enlarge, and in 1788 it was pronounced to be cancer. For two years this dreadful malady increased, and on the 15th December, 1790, she breathed her last, dying, as she long had lived, in the peace of God.

But Mr. Newton had learned to give up his dearest treasure to Him from whom he had first received her, as a precious *loan* returned to the rightful owner. And he found, too, that the grace of God in Christ could fill even the largest chasm left by his departed friends. We get his own real sentiments, in a poetic form, in some of the verses written for the occasion of Mrs. Newton's funeral sermon:—

"Not vintage, harvest, flocks, nor herds,  
Can fill the heart's desire;  
And oft a worm destroys our gourds,  
And all our hopes expire.

Domestic joys, alas, how rare!  
Possess'd and known by few;  
And they who know them find they are  
As frail and transient too.

But you who love the Saviour's voice,

And rest upon His name,  
Amidst these changes may rejoice,  
For He is still the same.

The Lord Himself will soon appear,  
Whom you, unseen, adore;  
Then He will wipe off every tear,  
And you shall weep no more!"

In a letter to Miss Hannah More, on this trying occasion, he says:—"You will observe that I ask not only for *prayers* but also for *praises* on my behalf. I could begin every letter with the words of David, 'Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!' Great has been His goodness. I am a wonder to many, and to myself." Then, looking back upon his fond attachment to the departed, and forward to his own solitary path, he adds—"I am to live, if I can, not for myself, but for Him who redeemed me from the house of bondage in Africa, and called me out of darkness into marvellous light."

Thus he was still upheld by the power of God for purposes of mercy and grace; and many souls had reason to glorify God for the continued ministry of Mr. Newton, both in and out of the pulpit.

#### **XIV.**

One dear and tender tie yet remained to engage and reciprocate his affectionate regards. He had no children of his own, but had brought up two nieces, Miss Cunningham and Miss Elizabeth Catlett. The former had been removed by an early death; Mrs. Newton had also gone to the house of all living. Miss Catlett thus became the sole prop and stay of Mr. Newton's declining age. By her constant and affectionate solitudes she became to him all that a dutiful daughter could be. But she was seized, in 1801, with a distressing nervous disorder, which at length increased to positive insanity, and Mr. Newton was left for a full year to walk by faith, *alone*.

In this last trying dispensation his soul was sustained by the faithfulness of God, and he found his daily solace in the Lord's service. More than ever precious were the hours to him as he drew nearer to their end. He ceased his annual summer visits to the country, and sedulously bought up every day for the finishing of his testimony. In May, 1805, he said to a friend—"I do not intend now to move beyond the stones of London. I am eighty. I have but little time left. I would not leave my people now for a thousand pounds."

After this his friends began to advise him to discontinue his public

ministrations. His sight and memory failed him, and he was urged to stop before his increased infirmities compelled him. Raising his voice, he exclaimed—"I cannot stop. What! shall the *old African Blasphemer* stop while he can speak?"

Our story draws to its conclusion; and it shall be to the praise of the Redeemer's grace if, in this brief recital, the example of John Newton shall lead one trembling sinner to the cross of Christ, or one tried and weary saint to the throne of grace.

The grace that sustained him through so many times of anguish and trial is exceedingly abundant still to every soul that waits upon the Lord. And no poor sinner who has read the story of John Newton can say, "I am beyond the reach of free and sovereign mercy."

"For this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting." (1 Tim. i. 16.)

On the 21st of December, 1807, he entered into his Master's joy, in the eighty-third year of his pilgrimage; and his epitaph, written by his own hand, thus briefly recapitulates his life:—

**John Newton, Clerk,**

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.

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