

Reformation Series 2010
(Lecture Four: John Newton)

IV. John Newton (1725-1807).

A. Life.

1. Birth and early life.

- a. Newton was born in London, July 24, 1725.
- b. His father – who had been trained at a Jesuit College in Spain – was the master of a ship in the Mediterranean trade. In 1748, he became governor of York Fort, Hudson Bay, where he drowned in 1751.
- c. His mother, Elizabeth, was a member of an Independent Church under the care of Dr. Jennings.
 - (i) John was her only child.
 - (ii) She died of consumption on July 11, 1732 when John was only seven years old; but before that, she had done her best to train him in the ways of the Lord.
- d. His father married again the following year, but John’s new stepmother took little interest in his character and upbringing.
- e. His biographer, C. Knapp, writes, “He thus passed into different hands, and, though well-cared for in other respects, his Christian mother’s instructions were not replaced. He was allowed to run with ill-bred and profane children, and very soon followed their pernicious ways. He was soon after sent to a boarding-school in Essex, where he remained until his tenth year, when his father took him with him to sea. This continued till 1742. ‘At this period,’ he writes, ‘my temper and conduct were exceeding various. At school, or soon after, I had little concern about religion, and easily received very ill impressions. But I was often disturbed with convictions. From a child I was fond of reading. Among other books Burnet’s ‘Christian Oratory’ often came in my way; and though I understood but little of it, the course of life therein recommended appeared very desirable, and I was inclined to attempt it. I began to pray, to read the Scriptures, and to keep a sort of diary. I was, presently, religious in my own eyes; but, alas, this seeming goodness had no solid foundation, but passed away like a morning cloud, or an 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 from under my parents’ view. All this was before I was twelve years old.’”
- f. Around this time, he had a fall from a horse that nearly threw him into the stakes of a freshly cut row of hedges. This made him restrain his sin for a while, but he soon fell back into indifference.
- g. He was again awakened when he was almost drowned: He and one of his friends had agreed to go on board a man-of-war, but he was late and the boat left without him. While on its way, it capsized drowning his friend with several others. He wrote, “I was invited to the funeral of my play-fellow, and was exceedingly affected to think that by a delay of a few minutes (which had much displeased and angered

me, till I saw the event), my life had been preserved. However, this likewise was soon forgotten.”

- h. He writes regarding his final attempts to reform himself before he fell into his final relapse of sin that ended with his conversion, “My last reform was the most remarkable, both for degree and continuance. Of this period, or at least some part of it, I could use the apostle’s words: ‘After the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.’ I did everything that might be expected from a person entirely ignorant of God’s righteousness, and desirous to establish his own. I spent the greatest part of every day in reading the Scriptures, meditation and prayer; I fasted often. I even abstained from all animal food for three months; I would hardly answer a question, for fear of speaking an idle word. I seemed to bemoan my former miscarriages very earnestly, sometimes with tears. In short, I became an ascetic, and endeavored, so far as my situation would permit, to renounce society, that I might avoid temptation. I continued in this serious mood (I cannot give it a higher title) for more than two years, without any considerable breaking off. But it was a poor religion; it left me in many respects under the power of sin, and, so far as it prevailed, only tended to make me gloomy, stupid, unsociable, and useless.”
- i. When he was eleven (1736), he went to sea with his father, and made six voyages with him before 1742. This was the year his father retired from the service, and became governor of York Fort, under the Hudson Bay Company.
- j. In 1742, John made a voyage to Venice in a ship that was commanded by a friend of his father’s. The opportunities it provided to sin were too strong, and he again quickly fell into sin.
 - (i) He had a dream that awakened him for a time, but it soon left him. He details his experiences during this time in a series of letters called, “From the Service of Sin.”
 - (ii) In these letters, he mentions an unbelieving shipmate who became one of his intimate friends.
 - (iii) He writes of him, “He was a person of exceedingly good natural talents and much observation. He was the greatest master of what is called the free-thinking school I remember to have met with, and he knew how to insinuate his sentiments in the most plausible way. His zeal also was equal to his address; he could hardly have labored more in the cause if he had expected to gain heaven by it.”
 - (iv) Newton goes on to write how this man later drowned when his ship was caught in a storm. The ship and its crew escaped, but a wave swept over the decks and swept him into eternity.
- k. Newton was next compelled into the navy in 1743 and served on the H.M.S. Harwich.
 - (i) Through his father’s influence, he was made a midshipman.
 - (ii) He soon deserted his charge. When he was recaptured, he was publicly whipped and demoted to the rank of a common seaman (1745).
 - (iii) He was so angry with the officer in charge that he purposed to kill him.
 - (iv) He writes that his hope of revenge was the only thing that prevented him from taking his own life. At this point, he had rejected heaven and hell; he believed that death would only end his existence.

- l. He was on a ship sailing for India at the time – a voyage that would have lasted for five years – but at his urgent request, he changed ships at Madeira for a vessel bound for Guinea.
 - m. His service on this ship ended when he was engaged to work for a slave dealer on the west coast of Africa.
 - (i) When he landed on the island of Benanoes (Banana Island), he writes, he had “little more than the clothes upon my back, as if I had escaped shipwreck.”
 - (ii) He was completely under power of his employer, and for the better part of a year was treated like a slave.
 - (iii) Speaking of this time, he writes, “I have seen frequent cause since to admire the mercy of the Lord in banishing me to those distant parts, and almost excluding me from human society, at a time when I was big with mischief, and, like one infected with a pestilence, was capable of spreading a taint wherever I went.”
 - n. His master finally transferred him to another trader, where he fared somewhat better and was given part in the business.
 - (i) He wrote to his father frequently, begging him to find some way to bring him home.
 - (ii) His father gave instructions to a ship sailing to that area which subsequently retrieved him. He lived as a passenger on that ship for about a year, while she sailed along the coast gathering gold, ivory, dyewood, and beeswax.
 - (iii) He writes, “I had no business to employ my thoughts, but sometimes amused myself with mathematics. Excepting this, my whole life when awake was a course of most horrid impiety and profaneness.”
2. His conversion.
- a. Around the beginning of January, 1748, they set sail for England, a journey of a little more than 7,000 miles.
 - b. On the voyage, Newton began reading a copy of “Thomas á Kempis.” As he read, he began thinking, “What if these things are true?”
 - c. He closed the book and tried to put these thoughts out of his mind by engaging his companions in useless conversation. But when he retired that evening, he was roused from his sleep by a violent storm. The waves broke over the ship and filled his cabin with water. In his alarm, he cried out, “May the Lord have mercy upon us!” This was the first prayer he had spoken for many years. He thought the ship was sinking and tried to reach the deck. The captain met him on the ladder, who asked him to bring a knife. When he was returning to get the knife, the man who went on deck in his place was immediately washed overboard. For four weeks their damaged ship was tossed about at the mercy of the winds and waves. Death constantly stared them in the face.
 - d. When the danger was past, Newton began to think more soberly about life. He also, like Jonah, realized that he was in the hands of God.
 - (i) He thought about his numerous sins, his false professions and relapses, and came under a powerful conviction.

- (ii) He thought his sins were too many and too great to be forgiven. Passages of Scripture regarding the unpardonable sin came to his mind and drove him to despair of God's mercy.
- (iii) But the Lord encouraged him:
 - (a) He had a New Testament and a volume of William Beveridge's sermons. One of these sermons on the death of Christ had a profound effect. He was particularly struck by the conversion of Paul and the reception of the Prodigal Son.
 - (b) The Lord used two passages of Scripture to minister to him, "How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?" (Luke 11:13); and, "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine" (John 7:17).
 - (c) He had also given the ship a godly captain to give him spiritual guidance.
- (iv) Before they landed at Ireland, he had placed his whole hope of heaven in Christ, whose blood has the power to take away every sin. It was then March 10, 1748, and Newton was twenty-three. To the end of his life, he kept this anniversary of his conversion as a day of humiliation and thanksgiving for the Lord's "great deliverance."
- (v) It was from these experiences he would later write, "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," and "Amazing Grace."

3. Life after conversion and marriage.

- a. When he had settled again in England, he was offered command of a slave ship by a friend of his father, Mr. Manesty. Newton accepted, preferring to go as first mate (1748-49).
- b. On February 12, 1750, he was married to Mary Catlett, the daughter of a distant relative, whom he had loved since 1742, when he was only seventeen, and she was fourteen.
- c. Two voyages, as master, to Africa and the West Indies, closed on August, 1754, his life at sea.
 - (i) Newton was still a slave-trader, and in his two voyages carried probably not less than 500 Africans into West Indian slavery. R. E. Welsh writes, "He made several voyages as a captain; purchased slaves, and sold them again in the West Indies. Curious what contradictory principles can live in the same mind! His conscience did not trouble him on the slave question."
 - (ii) He was about to embark on a third voyage, but on the evening before he sailed, he became ill.
 - (iii) It was then that he finally quit the sea.

4. Entrance into the ministry.

- a. During his career as a sailor, Newton was successful in educating himself.
- b. While in Africa, he mastered the first six books of Euclid, the Greek mathematician.
- c. He taught himself Latin by reading Virgil, Terence, Livy, and Erasmus. He memorized the works of the Roman poet Horace. (Undoubtedly contributing to his poetic abilities.)

- d. He also studied the Bible with increasing devotion, and under the tutelage of a Captain Clunie at St. Kitts, adopted Calvinistic views of theology.
- e. While he captained the slave ships, he worked on subduing swearing and immorality and read the Liturgy twice on Sundays to the crew.
- f. In 1755, due to poor health and a growing distaste for the slave trade, he acquired the position of tide-surveyor at Liverpool, having been recommended by Manesty; a post he held from 1755 to 1764.
 - (i) Shortly after he was settled there, Whitefield, whom he had already met in London, arrived in Liverpool. Newton became his disciple, and gained the nickname of 'young Whitefield.'
 - (ii) Wesley visited later and Newton laid the foundation of a lasting friendship with him; he also came to know William Grimshaw at Haworth, Henry Venn at Huddersfield, John Berridge at Everton, and William Romaine in London (Cf. Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*).
 - (iii) During this time he continued to pursue his studies, teaching himself Greek and learning some Hebrew and Syriac (Aramaic). He also studied theology.
- g. He soon resolved to enter the ministry, but was undecided whether to pursue Independency or the Church of England.
 - (i) He took active roles in prayer meetings and missionary movements. Occasionally, he would preach as a lay preacher. Finally, after consulting with friends, he decided to seek ordination in the Church of England.
 - (ii) In December of 1758, he applied for holy orders to the Archbishop of York, on a title in Yorkshire, but received through the archbishop's secretary 'the softest refusal imaginable.' It would be five years before he was ordained.
 - (iii) In 1760, he was in charge of an independent congregation at Warwick for three months.
 - (iv) Finally, when Olney was offered him by the Vicar, Rev. Moses Browne; and, with the help of the Earl of Dartmouth, the patron of Olney, he was admitted to orders.
 - (v) He was subsequently ordained deacon, April 29, 1764, and priest, June 17, 1764, at Buckden, when he was thirty-nine.
 - (vi) He began his work at Olney, in May, and continued there for nearly sixteen years.
 - (a) That same year he published an account of his life at sea and of his religious experiences, called "The Authentic Narrative."
 - (b) The first edition sold out and so a second edition was printed the same year.
 - (c) This book still holds a high place in the history of the evangelical movement.
- h. Olney was a small market town that manufactured straw plait and pillow lace. There were many poor in that town.
 - (i) Moses Browne was the previous vicar, who had recently been appointed to the chaplaincy of Morden College, Blackheath.
 - (ii) Newton's meager salary was soon supplemented through the generosity of John Thornton, an evangelical merchant to whom Newton had sent a copy of his

“Authentic Narrative.” Thornton encouraged Newton to keep an “open house” and to “help the poor” and if he needed further funds, to contact him.

- i. Newton was faithful to his charge, and the church became so crowded that a gallery was added.
 - (i) Prayer meetings were held in a large room at Lord Dartmouth’s old mansion called the Great House. Here both parishioners and some of the neighboring dissenting ministers met to lift prayers to God.
 - (ii) Newton preached incessantly, not only in Olney, but in cottages and houses of friends far and near.

5. Friendship with Cowper.

- a. In October of 1767, the poet William Cowper and Mary Unwin settled at Olney.
 - (i) Cowper had moved in with the Unwins while Mary’s husband – Morley, a retired clergyman – was still living.
 - (ii) After they moved to Olney, Morley was killed when he fell from his horse.
 - (iii) Cowper became strongly attached to Mary and the two became engaged; but when Cowper became overwhelmed with melancholy and anxiety – believing not only that the Lord had condemned him to hell, but that he should take his own life – the engagement was broken. Mary took care of him the rest of her life.
- b. Cowper and Unwin’s home was separated from Newton’s vicarage by only a meadow.
- c. Immediately, Cowper became involved in the religious life of the village. He joined Newton in all religious services, in his preaching tours and in his visits to the sick and dying.
- d. But in 1772, Cowper’s melancholy resurfaced, and he again attempted suicide.
 - (i) Newton treated him with the utmost tenderness.
 - (ii) Cowper and Mary Unwin lived with him at the vicarage for thirteen months.
 - (iii) Newton had the deepest affection for Cowper to the end of his life, and they never ceased to correspond together.
- e. In 1779, the Olney Hymns were published.
 - (i) In 1769, Newton had begun a Thursday evening prayer service. For almost every one of these services, Newton wrote a hymn that would be sung to a familiar tune. He also challenged Cowper to write hymns for these meetings. Cowper did until failing health prevented him in 1773.
 - (ii) Newton took the 67 hymns Cowper wrote, along with 281 of his own, and had them published under the name *Olney Hymns*.
 - (iii) In the preface, Newton tells us his two primary reasons for publishing these were to promote “the faith and comfort of sincere Christians” and that it might stand as a permanent record of his friendship with Cowper.
 - (iv) The following hymns by Newton are found there: “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds”; “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”; “Begone, Unbelief, My Saviour Is Near”; “Approach My Soul the Mercy Seat”; “In Evil Long I Took Delight”; “Come My Soul Thy Suit Prepare”; “Rejoice, Believer, in the Lord”;

“Great Shepherd of Thy People Hear”; “May the Grace of Christ our Saviour,” and “Amazing Grace.”

6. His move to London.
 - a. The Olney period was the most fruitful of his life. His zeal in pastoral visiting, preaching and prayer-meetings was unwearied. He formed his lifelong friendship with William Cowper, and became the spiritual father of Thomas Scott the commentator.
 - b. The last years at Olney, though, had their discouragements; and so in January 1780, he accepted the offer made by his friend, John Thornton, of the benefice of St. Mary Woolnoth with St. Mary Woolchurch, Lombard Street, London.
 - c. When Newton came to London, Romaine was the only other evangelical incumbent.
 - d. He began his work in December, and it wasn't long before the church was crowded.
 - e. As rector of St. Mary Woolnoth in London, he was in the centre of the Evangelical movement (1780-1807).
 - (i) His preaching was mainly extemporaneous.
 - (ii) One of his biographers writes, “Both Venn and Cecil testify to his scant preparation. His utterance was not clear, and his gestures were uncouth. But his marked personality and history, his quaint illustrations, his intense conviction of sin, and his direct address to men's perplexities, temptations, and troubles, sent his words home.”
 - f. In 1781 he published his largest and most famous work, ‘Cardiphonia,’ which was a selection of his letters.
 - (i) Several of these letters have been published also since his death. Newton himself said his letters would fill many folio volumes, and that “it was the Lord's will that he should do most by them.”
 - (ii) Among those helped by his personal counsel was Thomas Scott, the biblical commentator, whom he helped recover from Socinianism; William Wilberforce when he was at the crisis of his conversion (1785); Richard Cecil, his biographer; Claudius Buchanan, the eminent Indian chaplain, who was converted by one of Newton's sermons at St. Mary Woolnoth; young William Jay, minister at Bath; young Charles Simeon, whom he visited at Cambridge; and Hannah More (an influential poet in the Evangelical movement), with whom he stayed at Cowslip Green.
 - g. In 1786, the Handel celebration took place. Newton was not a great lover of Handel's Messiah and thought it seemed to profane sacred things. Yet it drew from him a series of sermons on the texts in the oratorio of the ‘Messiah,’ entitled, “Messiah: Fifty Expository Discourses, on the Series of Scriptural Passages, which form the Subject of the celebrated Oratorio of Handel.”
 - h. In 1788 he helped Wilberforce by publishing his own experiences of the slave trade – a restrained and yet straightforward account of the facts.
 - i. In 1789, he published his ‘Apologia,’ a defense of his adherence to the church of England. He wrote this to answer critics who charged him with inconsistency,

because of his attendance at dissenting chapels and his contempt for “all distinctive tenets outside the evangelical creed.”

7. His declining years and death.
 - a. On December 15, 1790, his wife died of cancer.
 - (i) He loved her dearly and had been preparing for her death for months in prayer.
 - (ii) Notwithstanding her death, he had the strength to preach three times and then her funeral sermon. The anniversary of her death was always marked by solemn meditation.
 - (iii) Just as he had described his wicked heart in his *Narrative* and his continued struggle with sin in his *Cardiphonia*, so now he expressed his love for his wife in his *Letters to a Wife*.
 - b. After her death, his house was kept by his niece Eliza, the daughter of George Catlett (Mary’s brother), whom he had adopted when she was orphaned in 1774.
 - (i) As his sight gradually began to fail, his reliance on her increased.
 - (ii) In 1802-3, she fell into a deep melancholy and was moved to Bedlam (The Bethlehem Royal Hospital, which is a psychiatric hospital).
 - (iii) “It is said that Newton, old and blind, daily stood under her window in the hospital, and asked his guide if she had waved her handkerchief.”
 - (iv) After her recovery she married an optician named Smith in 1805, but she and her husband lived under Newton’s roof.
 - c. In 1792, he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity from the University of New Jersey.
 - d. He continued to preach until the last year of his life, even though he was too blind to see his text and his pain from age was increasing.
 - (i) J. M. King writes, “A sweet story of him is told, that when he was nearly eighty he was almost blind, and could scarcely see to read his manuscript sermon, so a helper stood beside him to assist him in the pulpit. One Sunday morning John Newton had twice read the words, ‘Jesus Christ is precious.’ ‘You have already said that twice,’ whispered his helper; ‘go on.’ ‘John,’ said Newton to him, ‘I said that twice, and I am going to say it again.’ The roof timbers rang as again he cried, ‘*Jesus Christ is precious!*’”
 - (ii) “In 1806, when Cecil implored him to give up preaching, he replied, ‘I cannot stop. What! shall the old African blasphemer stop while he call speak?’”
 - (iii) His last sermon, during which he needed to be reminded of his subject, was for the sufferers from the Battle of Trafalgar (1806), during the Napoleonic Wars.
 - e. On December 21, 1807, Newton went to be with his Lord in his eighty-third year.
 - (i) William Jay saw him not long before his death. Newton’s bright mind had become clouded and his speech affected, but the visitor carried away one precious utterance: He said: “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things – that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour.”
 - (ii) He was buried by the side of his wife in St. Mary Woolnoth and a simple tablet was placed on the wall behind the pulpit to his memory, which reads, “John

Newton, clerk [preacher], once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa; was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Gospel he had long labored to destroy. He ministered near sixteen years at Olney in Bucks, and twenty-eight years in this church.”

(iii) The bodies of both were removed to Olney in 1893, when St. Mary’s Church was cleared of all human remains.

7. His works and hymns.

a. “In August, 1764, he published ‘An Authentic Narrative of some remarkable and interesting Particulars in the Life of Newton.’ He had printed a volume of six Sermons in 1760, at Liverpool. In 1767, he published another volume of Sermons, twenty in number. His ‘Review of Ecclesiastical History’ was issued in November, 1769. He wrote a Series of twenty-six Letters for *The Gospel Magazine*, with the signature of ‘Omicron,’ which, in July, 1774, were published in one volume. The ‘Olney Hymns’ appeared in 1779, just at the close of his Curacy. His ‘Cardiphonia; or, The Utterance of the Heart, in the Course of a Real Correspondence,’ was published in 1781; his ‘Apologia: Four Letters to a Minister of an Independent Church,’ in 1784; also, ‘A Plan of Academical Preparation for the Ministry,’ and eight papers contributed to the *Theological Miscellany*. ‘A Monument to the Lord’s Goodness’ was issued in 1785, in memory of his beloved niece Eliza Cunningham, who died that year. In 1786, he published his ‘Messiah: Fifty Expository Discourses, on the Series of Scriptural Passages, which form the Subject of the celebrated Oratorio of Handel’; in 1787, his ‘Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade’; in 1791, ‘Christian Character Exemplified,’ in the case of Mrs. Margaret Althaus; and, in 1793, in two volumes, his ‘Letters to a Wife.’”

b. Hymns.

(i) Julian writes, “As a hymn-writer, Montgomery says that he was distanced by Cowper. But Lord Selborne’s contrast of the ‘manliness’ of Newton and the ‘tenderness’ of Cowper is far juster [sic]. A comparison of the hymns of both in *The Book of Praise* will show no great inequality between them. Amid much that is bald, tame, and matter-of-fact, his rich acquaintance with Scripture, knowledge of the heart, directness and force, and a certain sailor imagination, tell strongly. The one splendid hymn of praise, ‘Glorious things of thee are spoken,’ in the Olney collection, is his. ‘One there is above all others’ has a depth of realizing love, sustained excellence of expression, and ease of development. ‘How sweet the name of Jesus sounds’ is in Scriptural richness superior, and in structure, cadence, and almost tenderness, equal to Cowper’s ‘Oh! for a closer walk with God.’ The most characteristic hymns are those which depict in the language of intense humiliation his mourning for the abiding sins of his regenerate life, and the sense of the withdrawal of God’s face, coincident with the never-failing conviction of acceptance in The Beloved. The feeling may be seen in the speeches, writings, and diaries of his whole life.”

(ii) Many of Newton’s hymns came from the personal history connected with them, or were associated with circumstances of importance. Rogers and Terry write, “John Newton wrote a song that told the story of his life. 1 Chronicles 17:16 was

the verse that inspired him to write *Faith's Review and Expectation*. The verse reads, 'And David the king came and sat before the LORD, and said, Who am I, O LORD God, and what is mine house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?' The verse of the song that reflects the 1 Chronicles passage reads this way – '*Thro' many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.*'" That song was "Amazing Grace."
(iii) Let's consider the words in light of the things we've just seen regarding Newton. This is how it reads from the *Olney Hymns*:

John Newton
8,6,8,6
Faith's review and expectation.
1Chr 17:16,17

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.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The LORD has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

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.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But GOD, who called me here below,
Will be for ever mine.

c. Any questions?

8. Sources:

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- k. John Newton. ChristianHistory.net.
- l. Olney Hymns. Wikipedia.