

JOHN NEWTON

Saturday, July 11

Reading: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

John Newton¹ was born in London in 1725. In his early years, he was taught the Bible by his Christian mother. But this was short-lived as she died of tuberculosis when Newton was seven years old. At age eleven, he went to sea with his father who was a merchant ship captain and for the next six years he learned life at sea. At age nineteen, he was pressed into service against his will in the Royal Navy. He promptly deserted. When he was captured, he was flogged. Somehow, he convinced the Navy to transfer him to a slave ship heading to West Africa to trade their goods for slaves to sell in the Caribbean and North America.

Newton did not get along with his new shipmates. The ship's cruel captain, one Amos Clow, gave him to his African mistress and she treated him as cruelly as her other slaves. In 1747, after a time of living in horrible conditions of hunger and squalor, Newton was rescued by a ship's captain who had been asked by Newton's father to find him. On the return trip to England the ship was caught in a terrible storm. The terrified Newton called out to God for mercy and the storm soon subsided. From this point Newton began to read the Bible and any Christian literature he could get his hands on. He soon accepted the doctrines of Christianity and tried to live a better life, but he later admitted he was not truly converted until much later.

For the next six years Newton continued to work aboard slave ships, eventually becoming captain of his own slave ship, though he attempted to treat his African prisoners in a more "Christian" way than he had observed on other ships. After a stroke in 1754 Newton gave up seafaring, but gradually the injustice of it all ate at his soul. In 1764, at the age of thirty-nine, he was ordained a minister in the Anglican Church. He pastored a church in the town of Olney where he met William Cowper. Both men were gifted in writing music and together they composed hymns to use in the worship of the church. In 1779, they published a hymnbook called Olney Hymns. Among the 280 hymns penned by John Newton in this collection is his most famous – Amazing Grace. The cry of his heart can be heard in its stirring verses.

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

Later in his life, John Newton became a force in the Abolitionist movement in England that sought to abolish the African slave trade. Just months before his death, the Slave Trade Act of 1807 was passed by Parliament that outlawed slave trade in the British Empire. His own words are inscribed on his tombstone: "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."² Shortly before he died, John Newton said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."³

¹ Alton Gansky. "John Newton" 60 People Who Shaped the Church, p. 232-235

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Newton

³ Gansky, 23