

## “Amazing Grace”

By ROBERT D. KALIS

A SUDDEN and violent lurch of the ship in the dead of night wakened John Newton out of a sound sleep. The ship was wallowing in a pounding sea. All was confusion around him as Newton lept from his bunk only to find the cabin already knee-deep in water. Someone cried out, “The ship is sinking.” Another despairing wail was heard, “We’re going down!”

Newton made his way to the ladder in order to climb on deck. Halfway up he met the captain who asked him to go back below for a knife. While Newton got the knife, another sailor climbed the ladder and was immediately washed overboard. There was no possibility to save him nor time to mourn him. Every man in the ship expected to follow him shortly. The violence of the waves broke one side of the ship’s superstructure to bits. Boards and beams crashed to the deck all around. All hands manned the pumps and the bailing buckets. The ship was almost filled with water.

About nine o’clock in the morning John Newton, exhausted from frantic pumping and bailing paused for a moment to speak with the captain. Turning from him Newton said, almost without

meaning, “If this will not do, God have mercy on us.” Instantly Newton was struck with his own words. It was the first desire for mercy Newton had breathed for a number of years.

Mercy? What mercy could there be for such a reprobate and blasphemer, mused Newton, as he applied himself desperately to the pump again. The waves still crashed about the seamen, and they secured themselves with ropes. The wind slackened some, and about noon Newton lay down to rest. Quickly he was roused and summoned to help again, but as he was unable to pump any more, he was sent to the helm where he steered the ship till midnight. Here he had leisure to reflect on his newly discovered desire for mercy.

Just the day before, while he had been reading in a copy of *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis, which happened to be on board, the thought occurred to him, “What if these things are true?” But he had hardened his heart and closed the book. He thought of the professions of religion he had made years ago, the warnings and deliverances he had met with. He remembered his blasphemous ridicule of the gospel and was

ashamed. Surely considering the many advantages he had disregarded, the deep experiences with God of his teen years, and the depths of degradation to which he had plunged, there was not a greater sinner on the face of the earth.

At about six in the evening Newton heard that all the water had been pumped out. Writing of the experience he says,

“There arose a gleam of hope. I thought I saw the hand of God displayed in our favor; I began to pray—I could not utter the prayer of faith; I could not draw near to a reconciled God; and call him Father. My prayer was like the cry of the 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, as I remembered, for the sake of those, who in their distress, should put their trust in Him.

“The 21st of March is a day much to be remembered by me, and I have never suffered it to pass wholly unnoticed since the year 1748. On that day the Lord sent from on high and delivered me out of the deep waters.”

John Newton was born in London on July 24, 1725. His father was the captain of a ship engaged in Mediterranean trade. Speaking of his early life Newton says, “I was born, as it were, in the

house of God, and dedicated to Him in my infancy." When only four years of age he could read well and his memory was already stored with many scriptures, poems and hymns. He was just as anxious to learn as his mother was to teach him. She prayed much for him and intended him for the ministry if he should be so inclined himself. On July 11, 1732, just before John's seventh birthday, his dear mother was taken from him.

John's father soon remarried. Although John was always treated well by his stepmother, his education almost stopped, and because he was now allowed to run with rough neighborhood boys, he picked up evil habits, and became troublesome. When only eleven years old his father took him to sea, and before he was fifteen he had made five voyages to the Mediterranean. Schooling was tried again, but he resisted the discipline and soon left.

Time and again during this time John determined to follow a religious life, but his resolves weakened and each time he plunged deeper into sin. He learned to curse and blaspheme and became exceedingly wicked. Three or four times he determined to live a godly life only to turn from it again.

His description of his last attempt is noteworthy:

"I spent the greatest part of every day in reading the scripture, 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."

This reformation lasted two years. Pernicious literature, however, slowly poisoned his mind and finally gave up his religious rigors. "I often saw a necessity of religion as a means of escaping hell, but I loved sin and was un-

willing to forsake it," he confessed later.

When John was seventeen, Mr. Manesty, a friend of his father, offered to take care of his future welfare if John would take a position for him in Jamaica. All was arranged, and John stopped in Kent to visit some distant relatives of his mother before leaving. There he met Mary Catlett, the eldest daughter. Although she was very young, he later wrote, "I was impressed with an affection for her which never abated or lost its influence over me. None of the scenes of misery and wickedness I afterward experienced ever banished her for an hour from my waking thoughts for the seven following years".

To go out to Jamaica for four or five years did not seem so appealing. Instead he signed for a voyage to Venice. On this trip he fell prey to evil company. Back in London, he again spoiled a plan his father had made for him, and was forced into the British navy. There he met companions who completed his ruin. He fell



*John Newton*

into disfavor with the captain, deserted, was caught, publicly whipped, demoted and set to hard labor "before the mast." The British man-of-war set sail for the West Indies.

At this point a providential change took place. One morning Newton was rudely awakened by one of his companions. He angrily dressed himself and went on deck. There to his astonishment he saw another ship alongside. Two sailors from the other ship were coming aboard and in their place two were to be let go. Newton begged to be discharged and his request was promptly approved.

The ship was bound for Sierra Leone in Africa, and the captain knew John's father. Uppermost in Newton's mind at this point was the fact that all restraint was removed. Now he could abandon himself to all his wicked desires. He soon had all the crew deriding the captain in little rhymes set to familiar tunes. When after six months the captain died, the first mate who succeeded to command threatened to put Newton on a man-of-war to get rid of him. This threat so frightened Newton that he jumped ship and remained in Africa, hiring himself out as a servant to a slave dealer.

Now Newton's circumstances deteriorated rapidly. Fever and dysentery weakened him. The black "wife" of his employer who was charged with his care deliberately neglected him. Only with great difficulty could he get a drink of water. Sometimes she sent him the scrapings from her own dinner plate. So low did he sink that he sometimes was pitied by the slaves who secretly slipped him food. After more than a year, he was allowed to go to work for another employer, and his circumstances im-

proved.

Father Newton meanwhile had requested Mr. Joseph Manesty to instruct all his sea captains to search for his son. Accordingly inquiries were made for John up and down the coast. In February, 1747, the *Greyhound*, a trading ship, turned about when it was almost past the place where John was located, in answer to a smoke signal sent up by a fellow worker of Newton. The captain tried to inveigle John by various means to return home with him, but only the thought of seeing Mary Catlett persuaded him to go.

But the ship was not heading for England just yet. For nearly a year it plied the West Coast of Africa trading especially for gold, ivory, beeswax and dye-woods. Newton gave himself to inventing the most daring blasphemies. Almost all his waking hours were filled with deliberate profanity.

Taking advantage of the trade winds the *Greyhound* sailed west to Brazil, then north to Newfoundland, then eastward toward England. It was at this point that the hand of God reached down from above to save John Newton from the raging waves of the stormy sea.

Undoubtedly it was this experience Newton had in mind when some twenty years later he wrote the well known hymn:—

*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!*

Safely back in England, a newly converted John Newton was offered the command of a ship

by Joseph Manesty. John declined on grounds of inexperience, for he was only twenty-three years of age. Instead he made one voyage as a first mate and then accepted the generous offer of Mr. Manesty and, becoming a captain, made three voyages. His improved circumstance enabled him to propose to his beloved Mary, and he was readily accepted. For almost six years John Newton continued his life on the sea during which he spent much time in prayer and in the study of the Scriptures. In 1754 he left the sea forever, and for the next nine years was employed as a tide-surveyor for the government at Liverpool.

Here he came under the influence of George Whitefield and John Wesley and presently felt a call to the ministry. Because of his former life he had considerable difficulty obtaining approval for ordination. Finally, in 1764, at the age of thirty-nine, John Newton was ordained to the ministry of the Anglican Church and sent to the small town of Olney.

At this place he was joined by William Cowper, one of the greatest poets of England. Together they compiled a hymnal for their prayer meeting group which met in the community house. To this new hymnal, John Newton contributed 283 of its 349 hymns. In addition to "Amazing Grace" are his majestic "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken" and "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds." (Cowper contributed the other 66, among them, "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood.") Known as *The Olney Hymns*, the book was published in 1779.

Truly John Newton could say, in the third stanza of "Amazing Grace," of his life up to this point when he was 54 years old:—

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

With confidence he looked forward in the fourth stanza of this hymn to what proved to be twenty-eight years of further service for his Master in a London church:—

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

When old, infirm, and almost blind, some friends advised him to give up preaching. "What!" he responded, "Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?" But realizing he must soon go to see the Lord Jesus whom he lovingly spoke of as "precious," he wrote his own epitaph:

*John Newton  
clerk  
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 faith  
He had long labored to destroy  
So it was that on December  
21, 1807, was fulfilled the last  
two stanzas of "Amazing Grace"  
which are seldom sung today:—  
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 forever mine.*

(The last stanza printed as part of this song, beginning, "When we've been there," was not written by Newton but was added in 1910 from another source.)