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# “A Wretch Like Me”: John Newton and ‘Amazing Grace’”

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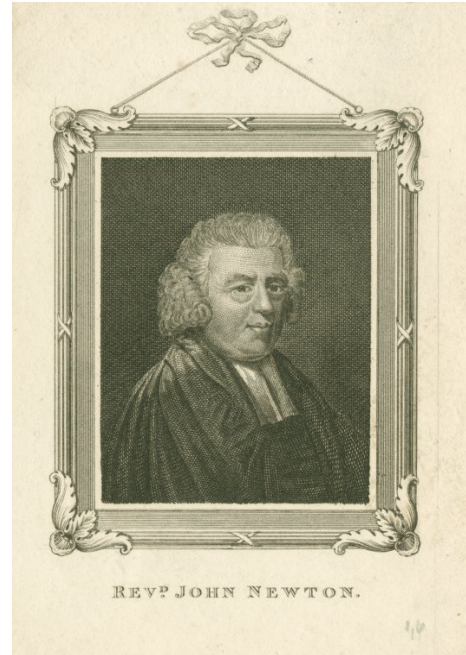
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History of Christianity II

“A Wretch Like Me”: John Newton and ‘Amazing Grace’”

A slave captain, a preacher, and the writer of one of America’s most beloved hymns - John Newton’s life has captivated Christians and non-Christians for years. How did a man caught up in one of the greatest atrocities of all time write a hymn that continues to speak to the souls of people from all backgrounds, ethnicities, and socio-economic classes? What led him to write compelling words that continue to ring true today? To begin to unpack the mystery behind John Newton and his work, historians have commonly begun by looking at his life. Throughout his life John Newton wrote extensively of his experiences. An example of this is his autobiography *Out of the Depths*. These writings have given us insight into the man he was and have led to many other commentaries regarding him as a person. There are extensive writings on his life, his musical prowess, and his contribution to society, but there are few writings that cover all three topics in a condensed fashion. This article will look at the lyrics and stanzas of “Amazing Grace” and see how they correlate to John Newton’s life and ongoing popularity of the hymn. Each section will take a stanza and highlight one or two lines that emphasize an



*Rev. John Newton. In the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. "" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed December 6, 2018.*

<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6da59e3b-9a12-2d4a-e040-e00a180635fe>

important part of either Newton's spiritual journey or the impact of "Amazing Grace."

Approaching "Amazing Grace" as an outline for John Newton's life and the impact of the song will offer a more holistic view of the hymn and John Newton's legacy.

Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound!)

*That sav'd a wretch like me!*

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.<sup>1</sup>

The song "Amazing Grace" commences with the title words that set a clear vision for the theme of this song. The blissful entrance into this song is then rapidly juxtaposed with the words "a wretch like me."<sup>2</sup> This is the moment where John Newton's biography becomes important in understanding why he would make such a claim. John Newton was born on July 24, 1725 in London. His father was a shipmaster and his mother was highly religious.<sup>3</sup> Due to this, Newton spent much of his early childhood with his mother who taught him the importance of biblical texts. However, on July 11, 1732 Newton's mother passed away.<sup>4</sup> This was the first event to severely shape Newton's early attitude towards religion. With her passing Newton lost the spiritual mentor in his life and from this point on his understanding of spirituality began to shift. He enrolled in a new grammar school that did not emphasize faith and without the foundation of his mother's

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<sup>1</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

<sup>2</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

<sup>3</sup> John Newton, *Voice of the Heart* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1950), 12

<sup>4</sup> Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 7

faith, Newton found himself being removed further and further from the religion he had as a child.<sup>5</sup>

As Newton aged he began to view his faith in terms of extremes. He would either act as if he was highly religious, or as if he had no interest in religion at all.<sup>6</sup> There was little middle ground, which led to Newton having a somewhat warped understanding of the Christian faith. The most drastic measure he took was during a two-year period when he “became a ship-bound ascetic.”<sup>7</sup> Newton’s cycles of wandering away from his faith and returning to his faith finally halted at age 17 when Newton picked up a copy of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics*. In reading this book Newton realized he could “believe in God and live a virtuous life without being guided by the teachings of Jesus.”<sup>8</sup> This understanding of Christianity gave Newton the freedom he had been searching for. Shaftesbury’s ideas gave Newton the permission to stop pouring so much energy into his spiritual development.<sup>9</sup>

With this new mindset, and over time, Newton started to become more closely associated with the slave trade business. On a trip to Africa he became “infatuated” with the Africans’ spiritual beliefs and lived a life that reflected more of Shaftesbury’s theology than the theology his mother had taught him.<sup>10</sup> God was involved in his life, but only so far as Newton allowed him to be. Newton’s involvement in the slave trade is

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 8

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>7</sup> Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 10

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 10-11

<sup>9</sup> John Newton, *Voice of the Heart* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1950), 12

<sup>10</sup> Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 35

commonly seen as one of the most agonizing elements of his “wretchedness,” but the events that led him to being a part of the slave trade are the true inspiration behind these words. Newton’s “lost” nature and “blind” approach to life were more influenced by his wandering in his faith journey than by his involvement in the slave trade.<sup>11</sup>

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
 And grace my fears reliev’d  
 How precious did that grace appear  
 The hour I first believ’d!<sup>12</sup>

While on a slave ship Newton’s view of God and faith was radically changed when an unbearable storm struck the waters surrounding their ship. Before the storm arose Newton had “‘carelessly’ picked up... *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis.”<sup>13</sup> While reading through this book Newton came to the realization that the words written, if true, would ensure his damnation.<sup>14</sup> Kempis warned against following your own desires, saying that doing this would lead you to lose the “favour of Almighty God.”<sup>15</sup> To avoid the challenges presented by Kempis, Newton responded in his typical fashion by “joining in with some vain conversation.”<sup>16</sup> Shortly after reading these words, however, Newton was forced to face these truths head on when the storm began. During

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<sup>11</sup> John Newton, *Voice of the Heart* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1950), 15

<sup>12</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

<sup>13</sup> Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 39

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 40

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 40

<sup>16</sup> John Newton, *Voice of the Heart* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1950), 14

the storm Newton “(vowed) that if his life (was) saved that he (was) going to pursue this relationship with God.”<sup>17</sup> By the next day the storm had ceased and in conversations with men on the ship, Newton began to realize the consequences of the words he had spoken.<sup>18</sup> In his book, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song*, Steve Turner makes the connection between Newton’s realizations and the words “’twas grace that taught my heart to fear.”<sup>19</sup> If the God spoken of by Kempis was real, Newton’s self serving lifestyle was nowhere near deserving of His grace. This left Newton in a predicament that he was unsure how to solve.

Newton attempted to bridge the gap between his current lifestyle and the lifestyle presented by Kempis through repenting of his old practices.<sup>20</sup> He engaged in the sacraments and made “a sincere surrender, under a warm sense of mercies recently received”, but still struggled with developing a genuine faith.<sup>21</sup> At a glance, Newton’s conversion experience has the elements that mirror the experience of the Apostle Paul on road to Damascus in Acts 9, but it is not as simple as it seems.<sup>22</sup> While his initial moment of surrender to God was dramatic and in a moment of high stress, his “sincere surrender” was in a moment of quietness with the Lord.<sup>23</sup> This is where we see the difference

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<sup>17</sup> *American Icons: Amazing Grace*, produced by Trey Kay (April 12, 2017; PRI and WNYC), podcast

<sup>18</sup> Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 42

<sup>19</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

<sup>20</sup> John Newton, *Out of the Depths* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1764), 82

<sup>21</sup> Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 45

<sup>22</sup> *NIV Journal the Word Bible*. (Grand Rapids , MI: Zondervan, 2015), Acts 9

<sup>23</sup> Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 45

between the lines “’twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears reliev’d.”<sup>24</sup>

During the storm Newton experienced the fear of grace that was associated with his unworthiness, but it was only after the storm that he was able to experience the relief that grace can bring.

*Thro’ many dangers, toils, and snares,*  
I have already come;  
‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.<sup>25</sup>

Newton’s surrender to Christ however was not an easy process. In the third stanza of “Amazing Grace” he acknowledges the “many dangers, toils, and snares” that continued to plague his spiritual journey.<sup>26</sup> Newton continued to wrestle with God despite his conversion experiences. In his own words, “I had learned to pray, I set some value upon the Word of God and was no longer a libertine, but my soul still cleaved to the dust.”<sup>27</sup> The “toil, and snares” of the world were not easily disposed of simply because Newton had committed to Christ.<sup>28</sup> He understood sin to be something that “first deceives, and then it hardens”; sin had a tight grip on Newton’s heart and he “had little desire, and no power at all to free (himself).”<sup>29</sup> Understanding Newton’s struggle with sin helps explain his utter dependence on the grace of God. Newton’s earlier habit of

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<sup>24</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

<sup>25</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

<sup>26</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

<sup>27</sup> John Newton, *Out of the Depths* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1764), 90

<sup>28</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

<sup>29</sup> John Newton, *Out of the Depths* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1764), 91

wandering and returning to the faith had manifested itself in new ways through his constant fight against his sinful nature.

While speaking about the sins that entangled him it is necessary to acknowledge his involvement with the slave trade. Newton never actually saw the slave trade as something inhumane or corrupt while he was involved in it.<sup>30</sup> The practice had become normal to him and it was not until he was afflicted with a fever that he realized the horror of it. The fever, which Newton believed to have been sent by God, “broke the fatal chain, and once more brought (him) to (himself).”<sup>31</sup> This grace-filled intervention by God drew him out of this sinful practice and allowed him to live more faithfully.

*The Lord has promis'd good to me,  
His word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be,  
As long as life endures.*<sup>32</sup>

After his severe fever Newton began to develop a more personal relationship with God. This shift from an impersonal God to a deeply personal God is shown in this stanza. At this point in the song Newton uses the word “Lord” for the first time.<sup>33</sup> This represents Newton’s more intimate understanding of God’s action in this world. He became more committed to understanding “the hidden life of a Christian” that focused on

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<sup>30</sup> John Newton, *Voice of the Heart* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1950), 15

<sup>31</sup> John Newton, *Out of the Depths* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1764), 91

<sup>32</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

<sup>33</sup> Kevin Lewis, “America’s Heirloom Comfort Song: ‘Amazing Grace’,” *Implicit Religion* 16, no. 3 (Sep 2013): 280



the “dependence of Him for hourly supplies of wisdom, strength, and comfort”.<sup>34</sup> This change in his understanding of God’s involvement in his life helped lead him to become a preacher at Olney. It was here that he wrote *The Olney Hymns*, which were published in 1770.<sup>35</sup> His preaching style was described as “practical, down to earth, and full of common sense”.<sup>36</sup> His spiritual journey up to this point allowed him to relate to his congregation through his sermons and music. One of the clearest depictions of Newton’s approach to Christianity later in life is presented in *Voice of the Heart*: “he understood that a Christian should not expect all his growth in grace to occur at once.”<sup>37</sup> Newton’s multiple “relapses” in faith gave him a unique perspective that made him confident in the Lords continual goodness. He then gave this hope to the people he ministered to.

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.<sup>38</sup>

As Newton’s life continued and his reflections on his past experiences increased he began to understand the futility of this worldly life. This perspective is vastly different from his original interpretation of God’s involvement in his life. Before his conversion Newton could not see any significance in something other than the “here and now,” but as his faith grew he realized that the “here and now” was actually the least dependable

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<sup>34</sup> John Newton, *Out of the Depths* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1764), 82

<sup>35</sup> John Newton, *Voice of the Heart* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1950), 16

<sup>36</sup> John Newton, *Voice of the Heart* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1950), 19

<sup>37</sup> John Newton, *Voice of the Heart* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1950), 19

<sup>38</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

thing to cling to. This is clearly expressed in his reflection on a relationship he had with his friend Job Lewis. Newton knew Lewis during one of his phases of “wandering”. Newton had been uncertain in his own faith, which had led him to lead Lewis astray. Newton’s negative disposition towards Christianity during this time in his life made Lewis perceive Christianity as unnecessary.<sup>39</sup> When Lewis died Newton began to reflect on the futility of life. He understood that one day his “mortal life shall cease”, but unlike Lewis, he will have “joy and peace” as a result of God’s action in his life.<sup>40</sup> He realized that if it were not for the grace of God he could have easily ended up like Lewis. He could have died being unconvinced by the goodness of God, yet God had saved him from this outcome.

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,  
The sun forbear to shine;  
But God, who call’d me here below,  
Will be for ever mine.*<sup>41</sup>

The theme of the mortal nature of life continues into the next stanza as Newton writes “the earth shall soon dissolve like snow the sun forbear to shine”. These lines that express the emptiness of earthly life have been one of the contributing factors in the longevity of this hymn. In expressing this Newton affirms the limitations of the earth, while also pointing us towards the faithfulness of God. Another factor in this hymn’s

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<sup>39</sup> John Pollock, *Amazing Grace: The Dramatic Life Story of John Newton* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981), 122

<sup>40</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

<sup>41</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

popularity is the way it has brought together groups of people over the years. When Newton wrote “Amazing Grace” it was “not considered in England to be one of his finest hymns.”<sup>42</sup> It wasn’t until the nineteenth-century Second Great Awakening in America that it increased in popularity. During this time in American Christian history there were many revival meetings that included both “free blacks and whites.”<sup>43</sup> At these meetings this song was sung in unity by people of all backgrounds and ethnicities; providing healing through communal worship.

The racial reconciliation brought about by this song was evident in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This book, written by a white woman, presents “one of the most memorable black characters in all of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature.” On Uncle Tom’s death bed Stowe chose “Amazing Grace” to be the song he would sing.<sup>44</sup> This choice made this song relevant to all people. It was not a “white hymn”, and it was not simply a “gospel anthem”, but rather it was a song for everyone. The hope of God’s faithfulness and the promise that he “will be for ever mine” relates to the themes of grace and reconciliation offered throughout the song and makes it relatable to anyone experiencing oppression, trial, or suffering.<sup>45</sup>

When we’ve been there ten thousand years  
Bright shining as the sun,

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<sup>42</sup> *American Icons: Amazing Grace*, produced by Trey Kay (April 12, 2017; PRI and WNYC), podcast

<sup>43</sup> *American Icons: Amazing Grace*, produced by Trey Kay (April 12, 2017; PRI and WNYC), podcast

<sup>44</sup> *American Icons: Amazing Grace*, produced by Trey Kay (April 12, 2017; PRI and WNYC), podcast

<sup>45</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

*We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we'd first begun.*<sup>46</sup>

There is no doubt that “Amazing Grace” has made a mark on American history, but why is it still so prevalent in our society today? One reason is expressed in the last stanza, which was not a part of the original writings of John Newton.<sup>47</sup> It encourages the continual praise of God no matter the circumstances. James Basker argues that this hymn’s impact is due to “the musical notes and its lyrics (that) appeal to people at moments of intense suffering...there is no specific condition, no specific religious faith, no specific cultural context.”<sup>48</sup> The lyrics of the last stanza turn our eyes to the larger community of which we are a part, which encourages a universal hope we all yearn for.

Newton wrote this hymn with the intent that it would reach far beyond the walls of his own church and congregation. He composed his hymns so that they could be used to help people “express their faith.”<sup>49</sup> In the preface of the *Olney Hymns* he expresses his desire for these hymns to “coincide with the views of real Christians of all denominations.”<sup>50</sup> He does this through taking an honest approach towards the human state of “wretchedness” and the need for grace. People will continue to sing these words

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<sup>46</sup> John Newton, *Letters and Sermons, With a Review of Ecclesiastical History, and Hymns Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1787), 43

<sup>47</sup> Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 244

<sup>48</sup> *American Icons: Amazing Grace*, produced by Trey Kay (April 12, 2017; PRI and WNYC), podcast

<sup>49</sup> William Phipps, “‘Amazing Grace’ in the Hymnwriter’s Life,” *Anglican Theological Review* 72, no. 3 (Sum 1990): 308

<sup>50</sup> John Newton, *Olney hymns, in three books. Book I. On select Texts of Scripture. Book II. On occasional Subjects. Book III. On the Progress and Changes of the Spiritual Life* (London: W. Oliver, 1779), ix

in times of sadness and joy because they have validated these real human emotions and directed them towards God. Kevin Lewis describes the words of this hymn as “weightless”. He states that their “function is solely to relieve, not to empower, not to energize.”<sup>51</sup> The relief that was sought by Newton during the storm is the same relief that was desired by the oppressed African Americans during the Second Great Awakening and the same relief we long for when we look at our suffering world. This hymn has spoken to the generations by providing comfort and encouragement when all seemed to be lost. It acknowledges the trials and tribulations we must face, while praising God all the same. John Newton lived his life in the tension of worldly reality and heavenly hope and he expressed this tension in “Amazing Grace”. It is in this tension of joy and suffering that we must press on and continue to praise God.

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<sup>51</sup> Kevin Lewis, “America’s Heirloom Comfort Song: ‘Amazing Grace’,” *Implicit Religion* 16, no. 3 (Sep 2013): 283

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