

John Newton: “Amazing Grace!”

I was born in 1725, and I died in 1807. The only godly influence in my life, as far back as I can remember, was my mother, whom I had for only seven years. When she left my life through death, I was virtually an orphan. My father remarried, sent me to a strict military school, where the severity of discipline almost broke my back. I couldn't stand it any longer, and I left in rebellion at age of ten.

One year later, deciding that I would never enter formal education again, I became a seaman apprentice, hoping somehow to step into my father's trade and learn at least the ability to skillfully navigate a ship. By and by, through a process of time, I slowly gave myself over to the devil. And I determined that I would sin to my fill without restraint, now that the righteous lamp of my life had gone out. I did that until my days in the military service, where again discipline worked hard against me, but I further rebelled. My spirit would not break, and I became increasingly more and a rebel.

Because of a number of things that I disagreed with in the military, I finally deserted, only to be captured like a common criminal and beaten publicly several times. After enduring the punishment, I again fled. I entertained thoughts of suicide on my way to Africa, deciding that would be the place I could get farthest from anyone that knew me. And again I made pact with the devil to live for him.

Somehow, through a process of events, I got in touch with a Portuguese slave trader, and I lived in his home. His wife, who was brimming with hostility, took a lot of it out on me. She beat me, and I ate like a dog on the floor of the home. If I refused to do that, she would whip me with a lash. I fled penniless, owning only the clothes on my back, to the shoreline of Africa where I built a fire, hoping to attract a ship that was passing by. The skipper thought that I had gold or slaves or ivory to sell and was surprised because I was a skilled navigator. And it was there that I virtually lived for a long period of time. It was a slave ship it was not uncommon for as many as six hundred blacks from Africa to be in the hold of the ship, down below, being taken to America.

I went through all sorts of narrow escapes with death only a hair breath away on a number of occasions. One time I opened some crates of rum and got everybody on the crew drunk. The skipper, incensed with my actions, beat me, threw me down below, and I lived on stale bread and sour vegetables for an unendurable amount of time. He brought me above to beat me again, and I fell overboard. Because I couldn't swim, he harpooned me to get me back on the ship. And I lived with the scar in my side, big enough for me to put my fist into, until the day of my death.

On board, I was inflamed with fever. I was enraged with the humiliation. A storm broke out, and I wound up again in the hold of the ship, down among the pumps. To keep the ship afloat, I worked alone as a servant of the slaves. There, bruised and confused, bleeding, diseased, I was the epitome of the degenerate man.

I remember the words of my mother. I cried out to God, the only way I knew, calling upon His grace and mercy to deliver me, and upon His Son to save me. The only glimmer of light I would find was in a crack in the ship in the floor above me, and I looked up to it and screamed for help.

God heard me. Thirty-one years passed, I married a childhood sweetheart. I entered the ministry. In every place that I served, rooms had to be added to the building to handle the crowds that came to hear the Gospel that was presented and the story of God's grace in my life.

At 82, 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." No wonder he understood so well grace--the completely undeserved mercy, favor, and goodness of God.

Newton's tombstone reads,

Born July 24, 1725, died December 21, 1807

"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."