

SUBJECT: God's Calling In The Present Age: John Newton

SCRIPTURE: John 16:8; Prov. 1:24-31; Gal. 1:23; Eph. 2:4-10; Acts 15:11; Heb. 7:25

AIM: To see the amazing grace of God in John Newton's life, that no matter how wretched is man's condition, He is able to save to the uttermost and transform those whom He predestinated and chose as vessels for His use.

MEMORY VERSES: Eph. 2:4,5,8; Acts 15:11a; Heb. 7:25

CONTENT: John Newton was born in London, England on July 24, 1725, the son of a commander of a merchant ship which sailed the Mediterranean. His mother, a devout Christian who taught him Bible verses, died when he was seven. His father remarried and had three other children. At age eleven, John left school and joined his father's ship to start life as a seaman. He made six voyages with his father before the elder Newton retired. John's early years were one continuous round of rebellion and debauchery. He was very much influenced by a book he read on atheism, Characteristics, by Lord Shaftesbury, so that he eventually took on its philosophy and became an atheist himself.

In 1744, John was kidnapped and forced to serve on a British man-of-war (naval ship), the HMS Harwich. While on the ship, he soon became the great blasphemer, twisting scripture and making a mockery of God and the Bible, causing the entire crew to roar in laughter.

Finding conditions on board intolerable, he tried to run away but was soon recaptured and publicly flogged and demoted from midshipman to common seaman. He requested to be exchanged into service on a slave ship, heading for the coast of Sierra Leone, Africa. In the ship he saw slaves shackled and packed like animals. Many died before they reached their destination and their bodies were thrown overboard. Others were abused by the sailors. The healthiest and best-looking ones were sold for the highest price. During the 17th and 18th centuries, natives were considered to be sub-human heathens who would benefit by their contact with Christian whites, as they would be converted and not go to hell. John Newton at that time shared this common view.

God was working in Newton's life. In 1748, while returning to England from Africa during a stormy voyage, he read Thomas a Kempis' book, Imitation of Christ. He began to ponder and fear if indeed what it said in the book about punishment of sin and of hell and of God's judgment were true, if the ship went down he would go to hell. He realized what a rotten, filthy, blasphemous and adulterous person he was. He was a great sinner! Remorse tore at his heart. "Maybe there is hope for such a wicked man as I." This sowed the seeds of his eventual conversion and personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Memory verses like John 16:8 and Proverbs 1:24-31, which his mother taught him when he was little, came back to him. He realized God was having mercy on him. They journeyed in their shipwrecked condition, and miraculously reached Ireland safely. He was convinced that God was real and he became a changed man.

Returning to England, he married his childhood sweetheart, Mary Catlett, in 1750. His friend Joseph Manesty gave him a job as captain of a ship trading slaves. While on a sailing trip, he met Captain Alexander Clunie, who was a true Christian who introduced him to the Dissenters. They stressed a relationship with Jesus as Savior and Lord. He also gave John names of contacts

associated with the evangelicals and insisted John witness openly.

While preparing to set sail as captain of the ship Africa, John ran into an old friend, Job Lewis, who had been a midshipman with him on the HMS Harwich, whom he had won over to his philosophy of life as an atheist. Now that he was a Christian, John tried all he could to undo the damage he had done to him and told him of the change in him when he met the Lord. Regrettably, it was all in vain. Job refused to change and not long after, he contracted jungle fever on a trip and died.

Later, after praying for another employment, John landed a job as Tide Surveyor. His new job enabled him to stay inland and meet with the evangelicals. His wife also took a liking to these meetings and he began opening up small testimony meetings. John was fearless in associating with the Dissenters, although they were denounced and persecuted by the State Church.

John did not have a formal education, but he taught himself Greek and Hebrew and read poetry and good books. He discovered that he was good in expressing himself in writing, and so he wrote the story of his conversion, “Authentic Narrative” in the form of fourteen letters, and it was published in 1764. It became very popular in England and America,

As he witnessed and spoke for the Lord, people encouraged him to become a parson. He felt unworthy due to his past sinfulness, until he read Galatians 1:23. He claimed similarity with the Apostle Paul’s experience—that he once blasphemed God and destroyed the faith of many. On his 33rd birthday, after a day of fasting and prayer, he decided to enter into the ministry to serve the Lord. He remembered his mother had prayed that one day he would become a minister. On December 16, 1758, John applied for ordination to the Archbishop of York. However, due to his lack of formal education and seminary training, he was rejected. Undaunted, he applied to various other archbishops and was refused as well until a devout nobleman with evangelical leanings, named Lord Dartmouth, used his influence to finally get him ordained by the Bishop of Lincoln. In 1764, at the age of 39, John accepted the curacy of Olney, Buckinghamshire. His parish consisted of mostly factory workers. Rather than doctrine, he emphasized the abundant life and the joy of a close walk with God. He invited those who traveled long distances to the church to have dinner at his home. He became an excellent preacher and his church was filled with as many as two thousand (2,000) people eager to hear him. He was so popular that he was invited to speak in other churches.

Since the Newtons did not have children, they filled this void by ministering to the children. John held classes for them and taught them the fear of God. He also taught them hymns and scriptures just as he remembered his mother doing for him. As many as 200 children attended his classes. He also encouraged small home meetings (cottage meetings) for those desiring more intimacy with God. This became a blessing to them.

In 1767, the poet William Cowper moved to Olney and the two became good friends. He encouraged John to write poems about his personal experiences with God and set them to music. Eventually the two compiled their works into the Olney Hymnal; sixty-eight (68) of the songs were written by Cowper and two hundred eighty (280) by Newton, of which are “In Evil Long I Took Delight” and “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds”. The most familiar of these hymns,

of course, is “Amazing Grace”, which reminded him that he was only a sinner saved by God’s great mercy, not forgetting the pit from which he had been dug.

After fifteen years of pastoring at Olney, he spent the next twenty-eight years as pastor of St. Mary Woolnoth Church in London. There he drew a large congregation and influenced many, among them William Wilberforce, a member of Parliament who would one day become a leader in the campaign for the abolition of slavery. Due to Newton’s experiences of the slave trade, he wrote articles that greatly influenced public opinion against the practice. And so in 1804, slavery was abolished in England.

On December 15, 1790, Newton’s wife Mary died of cancer at the age of 61. He continued to serve in St. Mary Woolnoth Church until his death on December 21, 1807, at the age of 82. Before his death, he proclaimed while preaching, “My memory is nearly gone, but I can still remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.” John and his wife were buried at Olney Church. On the tombstone were these words written by him: “John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slavers 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 labored to destroy.”

APPLICATION:

1. Our lives are in the hand of the Lord. John Newton went through many harrowing, near-death experiences, only to learn that the Lord had preserved his life for a purpose. Our existence is not a coincidence. God has a purpose for each one of us. His preservation of our lives is for us to witness and speak for Him.
2. No matter how wretched we are, the blood of Jesus Christ is able to wash us and save us from the bondage of sin. All we need to do is to turn to Him and confess our sins.
3. We saw how books influenced Newton. First, the atheist philosophy in Characteristics, by Lord Shaftesbury, and later, Imitation of Christ, by a Kempis. Therefore we should be careful as to what we read. We should read wholesome books that will bring us to a closer walk with God, and especially read the Bible, the Word of God.

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