

John Newton – Letter I

“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

- Luke 7:47

Introduction

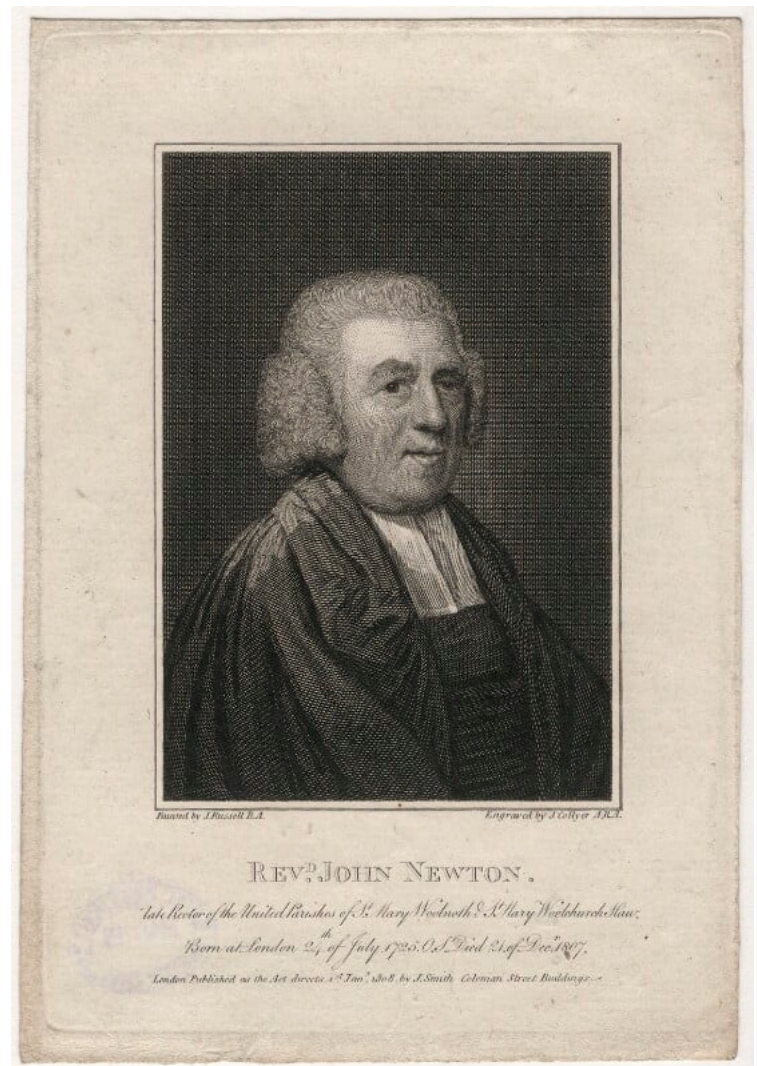
“I was born in London, the 24th of July, 1725, old style. My parents, though not wealthy, were respectable,” recalled John Newton when he was seventy years old.

He was born at Wapping on the Thames, a mile east of the Tower of London, and famous for its Execution Dock where pirates and mutineers were hanged.

Newton’s father, also named John, was captain of a trading ship in the Mediterranean.

Newton described his father as, “a very sensible and a moral man, as the world rates morality... I am persuaded he loved me, but he seemed not willing that I should know it.”

Newton’s mother, Elizabeth, was a devout and pious woman, and Newton said, “as I was her only child, she made it the chief business and pleasure of her life to instruct me, and bring me up in the



John Newton, by Joseph Collyer the Younger, after John Russell, line engraving, published 1 January 1808 (1788), 6 1/8 in. x 3 5/8 in. (154 mm x 93 mm) paper size. NPG D5354

nurture and admonition of the Lord... My mother died before I was seven years of age."

Following her death from consumption, or tuberculosis, Newton's father remarried, but neither his father nor his stepmother showed interest in the things of God. Newtons said, "I was, therefore, much left to myself, to mingle with idle and wicked boys, and soon learnt their ways."

From the age of eight to ten years old, Newton attended a boarding school at Stratford in Essex, before boarding his father's ship on his eleventh birthday, and so began his life at sea.

An Authentic Narrative

Between January and February 1763, when he was thirty-seven years old, Newton wrote fourteen letters to his friend, Thomas Haweis (1734–1820), telling the story of his life to date. Together, these letters have the title *An Authentic Narrative*.

In the coming months, I hope to reflect on each of these fourteen letters. In hearing Newton's story, my prayer is that we would know God grace that forgives and transforms, including His great patience with us.

Letter I (January 12, 1763)

A future happy time

Newton's first letter serves as an introduction, laying the spiritual foundations for the following thirteen letters, which tell the story of his life.

He begins with Moses' call to Israel to remember the "whole way that the LORD" had led them during their forty years in the wilderness, humbling them and testing their hearts in regards to obedience (Deut. 8:2). Newton says that they were often bewildered by their experiences – "the design of which they could not as yet understand" – such that God's plans for them seemed out of sight.

Yet, Newton reminds us that there was "a future happy time drawing near," when their fears and troubles would be no more. At that time, they would look back on their present burdens, and with pleasure remember the way, "by which the Lord thy God led thee through this wilderness."

The importance of heaven in our sights

For every believer in Christ Jesus, the future is bright, though the present may be difficult, and God's ways often seem mysterious to us.

Newton directs our eyes to heaven, and the way that our earthly lives ought to be lived in light of future hope. The hope of heaven, "inspires us with some degree of courage and zeal to press forward, to where Jesus has already entered as our forerunner; and when our eye is fixed upon him, we are more than conquerors over all that would withstand our progress."

In this way, Romans 8:35-37 was precious to Newton,

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Hindsight helps the pilgrim

Newton knew that faith is never perfected on earth, and therefore, “we often mistake the Lord’s dealings with us, and are ready to complain, when, if we knew all, we should rather rejoice.”

In this way, hindsight ought to help us. It will prove that the Lord has, indeed, led us, and our response will be to marvel with “adoration and love.”

Things that we once saw as “adversities or evils,” in hindsight, we shall see were blessings “which we could not have done well without.” In this way, Newton seems to be drawing from James’ words: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).”

Following the logic backwards, spiritual maturity would not have been reached without first encountering trials to test our faith. It is faith’s precious jewel that we learn to trust God who will work good, when we may only see darkness.

Indeed, this 'backward-and-forward' observing of God's grace was a theme in one of his later poems;

*From Egypt lately freed
By the Redeemer's grace;
A rough and thorny path we tread,
In hopes to see his face.*

*The flesh dislikes the way,
But faith approves it well;
This only leads to endless day,
All others lead to hell.*

*The promised land of peace
Faith keeps in constant view;
How different from the wilderness
We now are passing through!*

*Here often from our eyes
Clouds hide the light divine;
There we shall have unclouded skies,
Our Sun will always shine.*

*Here griefs, and cares, and pains,
And fears, distress us score;
But there eternal pleasure reigns,
And we shall weep no more.*

LORD pardon our complaints,

*We follow at thy call;
The joy, prepared for suff'ring saints,
Will make amends for all.*

- John Newton, Olney Hymns, hymn 42, *The Pilgrim's song*

The Lord changes all kinds of people

Newton said, "I am persuaded that every believer will, upon due reflection, see enough in his own case to confirm" that God has watched over and led, graciously, through the events of life. Yet, he adds that not every believer will understand this "in the same degree." Therefore, reflect carefully and often on God's loving guidance, to His praise. May His promises, grounded in Christ Jesus, give us a gentle and firm hope for life here and now, and eternal life.

Newton observed that the lot of some believers is to live steady lives with "little variety in life." Sometimes, in such people God's inward work is done "in a secret way, unnoticed by others, and almost unperceived by themselves." Yet, they truly belong to the Lord, and He has spoken to them "with a still small voice" to draw them gradually to Himself. Such believers many not be able to give a clear account of how they came to faith in Christ; they only know that they now trust in Him.

Colonel James Gardiner

However, Newton also observed that in other believers, God's power evident "beyond expectation." Every believer will enjoy

hearing the stories of other believers, as they serve as warning and encouragement to us. For Newton, the story of Colonel James Gardiner (1688–1745) from Scotland, was influential upon him. Gardiner's story, written after he had died, had many parallels with Newton's own life.

Like Newton, Gardiner's mother was devout, and yet despite her prayers and piety, Gardiner had turned away from God. Joining the army, he served as part of a Scottish regiment helping the Dutch republic. In 1706, Gardiner was nineteen years old and serving as an officer in the English army when he was involved in a battle with the French at a church-yard in Ramillies. He was shot by a musket-ball which went through his mouth. As Gardiner lay wounded all night in the field, his thoughts turned to God. Yet, at the same time, he feared losing his gold, and such was his desperation, that he used the blood from his wound to bind his money into his clenched left hand in the hope that if he was rescued it wouldn't fall out of his hand.

His life was marked by godless living, until in July 1719, "it very accidentally happened, that he took up a religious book, which his good mother or aunt had, without his knowledge, slipped into his portmanteau." Whilst sitting with the book, Gardiner saw a vision of Christ on the cross, surrounded by glory, and he heard a voice says, "O, sinner! did I suffer this for thee, and are these the returns?" His life was turned around to God, and his story caused many people to praise God.

There can be an unhealthy search for heroes by some Christians, and yet, hearing the stories of God's power and grace at work in people who were once very hostile to Him, ought to be an

encouragement. In Gardiner, and others, Newton saw, "These once eminent sinners, proved sincere Christians: much had been forgiven them, therefore they loved much."

A story to tell

In closing this first letter to Haweis, Newton explained that he was reluctant to write his story for two reasons: firstly, "the great difficulty of writing properly where self is concerned"; and secondly, the likelihood that people "of corrupt and perverse minds" would make ill use of his story.

He advised Christians to show restraint in sharing their testimony, lest "earthly" souls profane what they do not understand. Perhaps, he was thinking of the Lord Jesus' words to His disciples: "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you (Matt. 7:6)."

Nonetheless, Newton agreed to tell his story to his friend, declaring: "if God may be glorified on my behalf, and his children in any measure comforted or instructed by what I have to declare of his goodness, I shall be satisfied."

His final request was for Haweis to pray that in "all my poor attempts, I may have a single eye to his glory, who was pleased to call me out of horrid darkness, into the marvellous light of his gospel."