

John Newton – Letter II

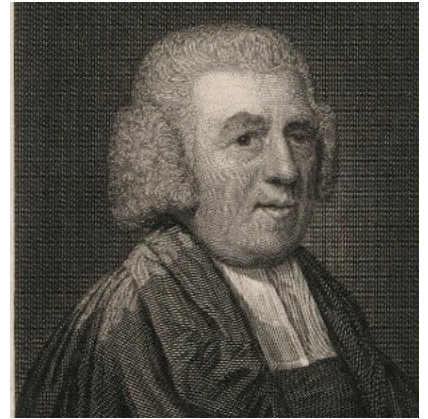
Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it.

- Proverbs 22:6

Elizabeth Newton, mother

Let the minds of all our youth
Feel the force of sacred truth;
While the gospel-call they hear
May they learn to love and fear!

- John Newton, *Olney Hymns*, hymn 9, *Prayer for a blessing*



Songs sung in the nursery often echo into old age. Newton's mother, Elizabeth (née Scatliff or Seatcliff), was "a pious experienced Christian; she was a dissenter, in communion with the late Dr. Jennings." She belonged to the congregational chapel in Old Gravel Lane, Wapping. Newton was Elizabeth's only child, and she spent most of her time educating him. At the age of four, he could read proficiently.

Yet, Elizabeth's most important work belonged to a different world (John 18:36). She taught her young son "many valuable pieces, chapters, and portions of scripture, catechisms, hymns and poems." Young Newton soaked it all in.

In particular, the hymns of Isaac Watts struck a chord with him. Watts was a friend of Dr Jennings, under whose shepherding Elizabeth spiritually grew. Amongst Watts' well-known hymns is *When I Survey*, as well as numerous rhymes written specifically for children, including this *Cradle hymn*;

Hush, my dear! Lie still, and slumber!

Holy angels guard thy bed!
Heavenly blessings, without number,
Gently falling on thy head.

I sinned away all the advantages

Yet, despite Elizabeth's efforts to raise her son in right ways, Newton confessed: "How far the best education may fall short of reaching the heart, will strongly appear in the sequel of my history... I sinned away all the advantages of these early impressions."

In saying this, he did not wish to discourage Christian parents from their important task of bringing up children in "the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4)." Rather, he hoped that his life was the exception to how God usually works, and he saw how his mother's training helped to restraint his behaviour for a time.

Most commonly, God works through families. It is part of His gracious design from the beginning (Deut. 6:6-7; Prov. 1:8). In the Bible, there are many examples of faith being shared down through the generations, such as Timothy, whose sincere faith first dwelt in his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice (2 Tim. 1:5).

Yet, the Bible also gives no guarantees when it comes to parenting. The godly king Josiah, who did much to reform life in Jerusalem, was replaced by his son Jehoahaz who "*did evil in the eyes of the LORD* (2 kings 23:32)." So too, it was Moses' grandson, Jonathan, who led God's people into idolatry (Judges 18:30).

Many years later, in a letter *To Theron, on Family Worship*, Newton wrote: "Happy is that family where the worship of God is constantly and conscientiously maintained... I do not say, that by honouring God in your house, you will wholly escape a share in the

trials incident to the present uncertain state of things... But this I will confidently say, that the Lord will both honour and comfort those who thus honour him."

In all this, pray that the Lord will capture the hearts of children and transform them for Him. Also, take encouragement from Elizabeth Newton – a mother's godly testimony lives on for many decades.

Captain John Newton, father

Newton's father, also named John, was the commander of a trading ship in the Mediterranean. In fact, Newton's first sea voyage, when he was eleven years old, was with his father, transporting corn to Spain.

However, the relationship between father and son seemed strained and distant at times. Newton described his father as "a man of remarkable good sense, and great knowledge of the world; he took great care of my morals, but could not supply my mother's part. Having been educated himself in Spain, he always observed an air of distance and severity... which overawed and discouraged my spirit. I was always in fear when before him, and therefore he had the less influence."

Then sadly, on 11th July 1732, Newton's mother died of consumption (tuberculosis), two weeks before he turned seven years old. His father was at sea at the time, and did not return to England until the following year. Soon after he returned, he married again.

Newton's father and step-mother, Thomasina, would go on to have several children, step-siblings to Newton. Although Newton says that he was "well treated in all other respects," without his mother's influence, he had nobody guiding him. He was allowed to

wander away from the Lord. Neither his father nor step-mother showed any spiritual interest in the things of God.

Imprudent Severity

Soon after his father's re-marriage, Newton was sent to boarding school in Essex, where "the imprudent severity of the master almost broke my spirit and relish for books." Instead of progressing in his education, he went backwards, forgetting "the first principles and rules of arithmetic."

In Newton's case, his school master's severity merely caused resentment and hardening. Yet on the other side, a pandering approach is equally woeful and unrealistic, as it ignores sin the heart of a child. We must seek to walk the path of biblical faithfulness, as God gives grace, training up a child in His ways.

A school master is not a parent, but there are similarities. Later on, Newton would advise Christian parents:

"God has given you a great power over [your children]. I have said do not be remiss in using it, but you must likewise beware of the other extreme... If correction is necessary, let it be accompanied with reasonings, persuasions and endeavour to show them that it is not to gratify your own passions, but from a regard to their welfare. Consider they are but children, therefore especially while they are unawakened, lay not too much upon them. Some good people have wearied their children by expecting conduct from them as if they were experienced Christians, and have thereby given them a disgust and distaste for religion, and made them look upon it as a burden. If you can keep them from sinful ways, and in attendance upon the means of grace, you have reason to be thankful. For the rest—a little advice now and then, always in a spirit of love and not too much at a time, is the best course.

They must, they will, have something to engage their thoughts till the Lord shall be pleased to open the eyes of their minds.”

Newton was to stay at the boarding school for two years, leaving in his tenth year. Yet, despite excelling at Latin, his behaviour was showing signs of concern.

Forgetting eternity

Whilst at school, his mother’s influence seems to have waned, and he showed little interest in the things of God. Yet, he did read some Christian books, including *The Christian Oratory*, written by Bengamin Bennet in 1732. Bennet encouraged a method of personal devotion to the Lord. Newton attempted to implement it, and so, he began to pray, read the scriptures and he kept personal diary. However, he soon quit it, and his behaviour became worse than before.

Occasionally, a close scare caused a slight spiritual stir within him. One time, he fell from a horse and narrowly escaped being killed – he was not yet twelve years old at the time – but despite some thought about eternal matters, he soon overcame his conscience and returned to “greater depths of wickedness.”

Another time, a friend died and this affected Newton – at least outwardly. Together, they had planned to go aboard a man-of-war, but Newton, arriving a few minutes late, missed the boat. However, on its voyage, the boat capsized and several onboard, including his friend, drowned. Despite Newton’s tears at his friend’s funeral, he soon moved on and forgot any spiritual lessons that could have been learnt. Every funeral is a reminder that one day ours will come

too, and so we ought to learn from about death – and life – at a funeral, than at a celebration (Ecc. 7:2).

Three or four empty professions of faith

Significantly, Newton says that during this period of his life, on three or four different occasions, he “took up and laid aside” faith in God. He was not yet sixteen years old.

Surely, this should serve as a warning to us. The Apostle Paul told the Christians at Corinth: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test (2 Corinthians 13:5-6).” Similarly, he told Timothy to avoid those, “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power (2 Tim. 3:5).” To convince someone, including ourselves, that we are a Christian when we are not is a grievous thing – and taking up Christian practices, is not the same as receiving Christ.

Like a Pharisee

Newton’s last attempt at reforming his young life was his most serious attempt. He said:

“[In] the apostle’s words, “After the strictest sect of our religion, I lived a Pharisee.” I did everything that might be expected from a person entirely ignorant of God’s righteousness and desirous to establish his own. I spent the greatest part of every day in reading the scriptures, meditation, and prayer; I fasted often; I even abstained from all animal food for three months... In short, I became an ascetic, and endeavored, so far as my situation would permit, to renounce society, that I might avoid

temptation. I continued in this serious mood (I cannot give it a higher title) for more than two years... But it was a poor religion; it left me in many respects under the power of sin, and so far as it prevailed, only tended to make me gloomy, stupid, unsociable, and useless."

In Romans 3:9, the Apostle Paul outlines our problem: all people, Jew and Gentile alike, are *under* sin. That gets to our sense of helplessness. We don't have the power to get free from sin, or to purify our hearts - and without a pure heart, who can be right with holy God? Often, our first reaction to this is to think that *we need to try harder to be better people*. That way of thinking tends to persist in us.

The only answer is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it — the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (Rom. 3:21-22)."

It is Christ alone who redeems us - and so begins our joy. Sadly, at this point, Newton knew something of spiritual exercises, but nothing of his need for Christ.

A poisonous book: *A Rhapsody*

It was in this spiritually vulnerable state that Newton then says that he bought a book from a "petty shop at Middleburgh, Holland." He was drawn to the title, *A Rhapsody*, and mistakenly thought that the author was "a most religious person, and that I had only to follow him and be happy."

Newton devoured the book to the point that he could nearly repeat it off by heart. Yet, in time, its teaching proved to be "a slow

poison” in his life, laying the foundation in his heart for the depravity of his life.

A Rhapsody was published in 1709 and was a significant book during the Enlightenment. Its author, Lord Shaftesbury (1671-1713), spoke of God sometimes, yet he rejected the need for supernatural revelation in order to understand life, or true religion. The book is a series of conversations between friends, in which true virtue is found within ourselves, and the natural order of the universe. Shaftesbury rejected the thought that we are *under* sin. Thus, we have no need for Christ, as He is described in the scripture.

Newton’s purchase of this book – and opening his mind to its contents - ought to be a warning to us. We must “take every thought captive and makes it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:45).” The mind is the turf on which most spiritual battles are fought.

In a positive sense, this means loving God with our minds, submitting to Him, and filling our minds with whatever is good in Him. Again, Paul commands us: “whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Phil. 4:8).” In time, Newton’s life seemed to prove the folly of Shaftesbury’s ideas.

A new life in Jamaica

By the close of this period, December 1742, Newton was seventeen years old, and it was his father’s plan for him to settle into life of business. Newton was to move to Jamaica, under the care of a family friend. But in his rebellious spirit, it was not to be.