

John Newton – Letter III

*Behold, you are beautiful, my love;
behold, you are beautiful;
your eyes are doves.*

- Song of Solomon 1:15

Love at first sight: Mary (“Polly”) Catlett



Newton’s father planned for Newton to sail to Jamaica, where a family friend, Joseph Manesty, would provide for his future. Preparations were made for his departure, however, a few days before he was to sail, he visited Kent.

As it happened, his journey took him within half a mile of the home of distant relatives on his mother’s side, the Catlett family. Newton’s mother had, in fact, died in their home. When his father re-married, the relationship between the families had cooled. Nonetheless, Newton took the opportunity, with his father’s approval, of visiting them.

It was here that he first saw Mary Catlett, known as Polly. Newton says, “Almost at the first sight of this girl... I was impressed with an affection for her, which never abated or lost its influence a single moment in my heart from that hour.” He later learned that when Mary had been born, their mothers had wondered if they would one day marry.

Mary was not yet fourteen years old, yet for the next seven years the thought of her never left Newton. In fact, she became his only restraint: “when I afterwards made shipwreck of faith, hope, and conscience,” it was his love for Mary that “was the only remaining principle.”

As a result of this first meeting, Newton concluded: "it would be absolutely impossible to live at such a distance as Jamaica, for a term of four or five years." Therefore, without telling his father, he stayed in Kent for several weeks until the ship that was to take him to Jamaica had sailed without him.

We become the company that we keep

Newton's disobedience "highly displeased" his father. Yet, soon afterwards, he joined a ship as a common sailor that was bound for Venice. It was here, though, that he was "exposed to the company and ill example of the common sailors," and soon Newton's behaviour reflected theirs. Despite sometimes feeling the sharp conviction of sin upon his conscience, he made few and weak efforts to curb his behaviour. He was sliding away from God.

This period of Newton's life serves as a warning to us. The Proverbs say, "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm (Prov. 13:20)." We tend to become like those that we spend time with, and therefore, must guard our friendships carefully.

Perhaps, being on a ship, Newton had no choice in company, and yet his own heart and mind seemed all too willing to be led. He seems to have shaken off any sense of his need for God or conviction of sin, as he became more and more like the company that he kept. Surely, we will not find true living in those who reject God.

A dream

At this time, there was a custom in Venice, called *the marriage of the sea*, which Newton must have witnessed, whereby a gold ring

was thrown overboard by noblemen. In a dream, God seems to have warned Newton by using elements connected to this custom. Surely, God did this with the purpose of exposing the foolishness of Newton's life, and to draw him to new life in Christ Jesus. Yet, in His sovereignty, like King Nebuchadnezzar (see Dan. 2:1), it was not enough to turn him to the right path of Christ.

In his dream, Newton saw the harbour of Venice – a place that he had recently visited. He saw himself walking to and fro, alone, whilst on watch on the deck of the ship. From somewhere, a person came to him with a ring. He told Newton to guard the ring carefully, and that whilst ever the ring was safe in his possession, then he would be "happy and successful." But if he lost the ring, then he could expect "trouble and misery." Newton accepted the ring, and was confident in his ability to care for it.

Sometime later, a second person appeared and asked Newton about the ring. When Newton explained the promise of the ring, this second person responded by saying that Newton was weak. At length, he persuaded Newton that such promises were impossible and he urged him to throw the ring away. Despite being shocked at such a suggestion, Newton's mind began to wander into "reason and doubt," until at last, he dropped the ring over the side of the ship. No sooner had it touched the water, then he saw in his dream "a terrible fire burst out from a range of mountains" behind Venice.

In his dream, Newton realised that he had been foolish to throw the ring away. To make matters worse, the person who had told him to do so, mockingly said that by throwing away the ring, he had thrown away any hope of God's mercy upon him. Newton understood that he had no other choice, but to go to the flaming mountains. He was in great agony about this, until in his dream he

suddenly saw "either a third person, or the same who brought the ring at first." Despite thinking that the ring was lost forever, this person, having rebuked Newton for his foolishness, unexpectedly went into the water and retrieved the ring.

Immediately, the distant mountain flames were extinguished and Newton joyfully went to receive the ring from the person who had retrieved it. However, he refused to hand it over, saying instead: "If you should be entrusted with this ring again, you would very soon bring yourself into the same distress; you are not able to keep it; but I will preserve it for you, and whenever it is needful, will produce it in your behalf." It was at this moment that Newton awoke.

Christ holds our salvation

It was only years later that Newton understood the significance of the dream. The ring represented his confession of God, which he readily threw off as he wandered away from God. Yet, despite his foolishness, when he did call out, "the Lord answered for me in the day of my distress; and, blessed be his name, he who restored the ring (or what was signified by it), vouchsafes to keep it. O what an unspeakable comfort is this, that I am not in mine own keeping." Newton understood that the Lord, as his shepherd, kept and watched over him.

Why did the man who retrieved the ring not give it to Newton for his safekeeping? Surely, God was teaching Newton that it is Christ who holds our salvation, otherwise we would be sure to lose it many times. In John 10:27-30, the Lord Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them

out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Christ holds His sheep with such strength that none can be lost. If ever salvation relied on *our* strength and *our* perseverance, then like Newton, despite our confidence in ourselves, we would again and again throw away the promises of God. Thank God for His strong hand to hold us.

Despite Newton thinking much about the dream other the coming days, as with other warnings from God in his life, he soon forgot any lessons that it could have taught him, and walked further from God than before.

Press-ganged into the Royal Navy

In December 1743, Newton returned from the sea voyage, and visited Mary in Kent. Once again, he stayed longer than anticipated, and this almost caused his father to disown him.

It was at this time that war with France looked likely. In a practice called "press-ganging," the Royal Navy used recruiters in ports and public houses to force any eligible men with sea-faring experience into serving in the navy. Sailors at this time often wore check-patterned shirts, and possibly this was how Newton was recognised, and press-ganged into serving on a man-of-war named *Harwich*. His first month aboard was hard going, but through his father's connections, he soon was promoted to "the quarter deck as a midshipman."

Sadly, Newton looked back on this time and confessed that it was the complete ruin of his principles. His closest friend aboard the ship, James Mitchell, was a free-thinker. He saw that Newton's

conscience still held him back, and that he not thrown off all the restraints of his religious upbringing. Working slowly, Newton confessed about Mitchell: “he so plied me with objections and arguments, that my depraved heart was soon gained, and I entered into his plan with all my spirit.” He seems to have convinced Newton to believe that God is his conscience – and therefore, he knew nothing of the depths of sin, nor the divine Son of God who died and rose to life for sinners.

Newton confessed, “I renounced the hopes and comforts of the gospel at the very time when every other comfort was about to fail me.” Sadly, Mitchell was later drowned at sea.

Suppress our conscience

At this point in his life, Newton overcame both his conscience and God. Romans 1 explains that this is not an intellectual or social problem, but a moral problem within each of us: we suppress of the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). Paul goes on to explain that the truth about God ought to be evident to us, because “his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made (Rom 1:20).” Thus, leaving us without excuse before God. Nobody can ever say that they needed more evidence to believe in God!

Likewise, it is never wise to overthrow your conscience, because it is given by God. Although it can often be wrong, it nonetheless, ought to restrain wrongdoing, and draw us to God. When challenged, we often become defensive, and think that sin is only a minor thing. We deflect, make excuses and dismiss. We take offense at those who tell us otherwise. We think that we can still be

moral people without God. In such situations, the most practical advice is flee sin by trusting that God is good.

All this shows that our problem is a native bend to *not* want to believe what should be clear about God. This leads us to suppress and waste our conscience. Yet, thank God that things suppressed have difficulty remaining that way, and His truth tends to slip out!

Whipped for deserting

In December 1744, Newton was allowed one day's shore leave, but taking a horse, he went to see Mary. When he returned to the ship, several weeks later, the captain was displeased, and Newton never regained his trust.

Soon after this, the ship looked likely to sail for the East Indies, which would have meant several years away from Mary. This was too much for Newton, and he hoped, again, to use his father's connections to, instead, join "the African company."

Newton said that these were "unhappy days" for him, and if he lived by anything, it was maxim "never to deliberate." Therefore, with little thought, he left the ship "in the wrongest manner possible." He had been sent ashore to ensure that other sailors would not desert, but seizing the opportunity, Newton himself deserted. He was hoping to find his father, and join another ship. He travelled for over a day, but he was then discovered by a party of soldiers. He was within two hours of finding his father.

Taken back to the port of Plymouth, Newton was humiliated, and walked through "the streets guarded like a felon." Two days later he was returned to his ship, where he was publicly stripped and whipped. His rank as midshipman was removed, and he demoted to being a common sailor again. In this, Newton says, he

was "brought down to a level with the lowest, and exposed to the insults of all."

Alone, and shunned by all aboard, the ship set sail on a five-year voyage to the East Indies. It was the prospect of not seeing Mary that most distressed Newton: "I was as miserable on all hands as could well be imagined. My breast was filled with the most excruciating passions, eager desire, bitter rage, and black despair. Every hour exposed me to some new insult and hardship, with no hope of, relief or mitigation, no friend to take my part, or to list to my complaint." Taking one last look back at the coastline of England, he thought of throwing himself into the sea – he could not swim – but the "secret hand of God" restrained him from doing anything desperate.

*Stop, poor sinners, stop and think,
Before you further go!
Will you sport upon the brink
Of everlasting woe!
On the verge of ruin stop!
Now the friendly warning take--
Stay your footsteps, ere ye drop
Into the burning lake...*

*But as yet there is a hope
You may his mercy know;
Though his arm is lifted up,
He still forbears the blow:
'Twas for sinners Jesus died,
Sinners he invites to come;
None who come shall be denied,
He says, "There still is room."*

- John Newton, Olney Hymns, *Alarm*