

John Newton – Letter IV

*For I know that the LORD is great,
and that our Lord is above all gods.
Whatever the LORD pleases, he does,
in heaven and on earth*

- Psalm 135:5-7

Tea-table talk

In Newton's fourth letter, he explains more details about his courtship to Mary. At first, his love for her wasn't taken too seriously: "It served for tea-table talk amongst our friends; and nothing farther was expected from it." Yet, in time her family spoke of marriage if certain terms were met, including his father's approval.

For the time being, however, Newton was aboard the *Harwich* man-of-war, having been press-ganged into service of the Royal Navy. As the ship set sail for Madeira, Portugal, Newton was miserable, with his mind dwelling on "the most gloomy thoughts."

Playing the victim

Often when we are exposed, we playing the victim, like an arsonist burning down their house, then crying foul and scolding the crowd for their cruelty in leaving him homeless. Although Newton later confessed that he deserved all that happened to him, upon the *Harwich* he said, "my pride... suggested that I had been grossly injured." He even resented the ship's captain to the point of wanting to take his life.

We tend to think that we are right all the time, but it is the LORD who weighs our actions and motives (Prov. 16:2). Playing the victim is an irrational sin, because it runs against reality. We think that it will make us feel better, yet it causes us to look inwards, drains our joy and, ultimately, hardens us against God. Proverbs

19:3 says: "When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the LORD."

Looking back, Newton's judgment of himself was sobering: "I was capable of anything. I had not the least fear of God before my eyes, nor (so far as I remember) the least sensibility of conscience. I was possessed of so strong a spirit of delusion, that I believed my own lie, and was firmly persuaded that after death I should cease to be. Yet the Lord preserved me!"

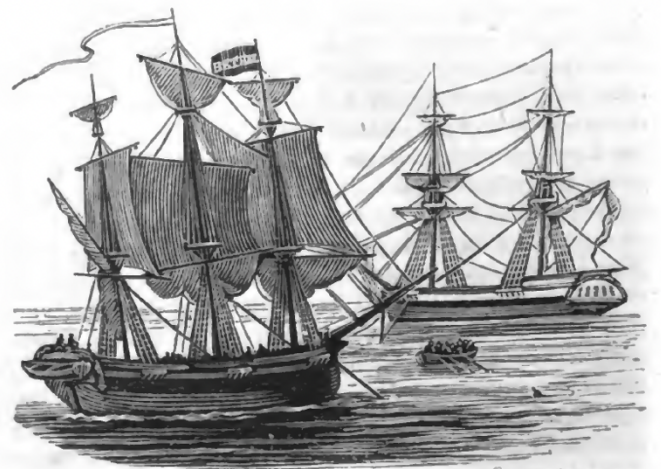
The restraining influence of Newton's love for Mary

God's common grace is powerful in the world. At least in part, it restrains sin within individuals and societies so that we are not as bad as we could be. Although Newton had walked away from God, such that he said "I neither feared God, nor regarded men," yet something restrained him from utter destruction: his love for Mary. He said, "In a word, my love to Mrs. N- was now the only restraint I had left." He held on to the hope of one day returning to England and seeing Mary again.

A sudden change of plan

Newton made up his mind that rather than sail to the distant Indies, he would go to the west coast of Africa. The opportunity came suddenly, and unexpectedly.

The *Harwich* had been at Madeira for some time, but was preparing to sail the following day, when Newton, having slept in, was awakened by one of the midshipmen. The man urged Newton to rise, and then cut down his hammock when he was slow to move. Newton was angry at this, but as he emerged on to the



An illustration from an 1854 edition of An Authentic Narrative showing Newton being transferred between ships.

ship's deck, he saw another man leaving the ship in a boat. When Newton asked where he was going, he heard that a ship bound for Guinea, Africa, was nearby and two sailors were to be exchanged between the ships.

Immediately, Newton asked the boat to wait whilst he sought the captain's permission, through the lieutenants, for him to join the ship bound for Guinea. The captain, who had refused to exchange Newton on previous occasions, now consented, and a little more than half an hour after he had been roused from his sleep, Newton was safely aboard the other vessel.

As Newton reflected on this sudden change of events, he said: "This was one of the many critical turns of my life, in which the Lord was pleased to display his providence and care, by causing many unexpected circumstances to concur in almost an instant of time. These sudden opportunities were several times repeated; each of them brought me into an entire new scene of action, and they were usually delayed to almost the last moment in which they could have taken place."

The mystery of God's providence in life

God's providence is mysterious, yet because of His goodness, we can trust Him. Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." He uses primary and secondary causes to accomplish all that He desires. His providence can be as gentle as a breath of wind, or as violent as a thunderstorm. It encompasses all things, from the most inconspicuous events of life, to the most obvious.

The Heidelberg Catechism, question 27, says that the providence of God is:

The almighty and ever present power of God by which God upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity

and poverty - all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

From an earthly perspective, if Newton's companion had allowed him to sleep instead of waking him, then perhaps his story would have ended differently. But in the providence of God, Newton's life took a different turn.

Aboard the new ship

Newton's behaviour was did not change all because he was aboard a new ship. In fact, whilst Newton had been aboard the *Harwich*, the strict Navy regulations had, to a degree, disguised his true character. No sooner was he on the small boat that took him to his new ship, then he dropped all pretences. He said to himself: "I might now be as abandoned as I pleased, without any control."

The new ship¹ was a slave ship bound for Sierra Leone. The captain knew Newton's father, and so Newton was "received kindly." However, Newton's behaviour soon caused trouble. He admitted: "I was exceedingly vile indeed." He described himself as fitting the description of 2 Peter 2:14, "They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children!"

Sin's grotesque character is that whilst at first it hates to be brought into the open – like Adam and Eve trying to hide their sin from God (Gen. 3:8) – it always craves acceptance, and like a leech wanting more, it desires greater acceptance. In this way, sin is also social – it craves company, and soon Newton drew his new crew-mates into his sinful ways.

A sharp temper

¹ Often this ship is identified as the *Pegasus*, however maritime records suggest that it was possibly the *Levant*. The *Levant* was a 200-ton ship that left Bristol in March 1745, and arrived in the Caribbean in March 1746 with 410 slaves.

A quarreller is someone who is prickly, difficult to get on with, judgmental and always thinks that they are right. So it is that two fools meeting one another will soon clash, and within a short time Newton was at odds with the captain. They both had sharp tempers, and added to this, Newton "had a little of that unlucky wit, which can do little more than multiply troubles and enemies." Newton made up a song that disrespectfully mocked, amongst other things, the captain of the ship. He then had the gall to teach it to others on board.

Our tongues were made with glory, so that with his tongue Adam named the animals and spoke with God (Gen. 2:19). Yet, our tongues also reveal what is in our hearts. As James says, "every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue (James 3:7-8)."

Proverbs 12:13 says, "An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips, but the righteous escapes from trouble." A gentle tongue brings life, but a mocking tongue multiplies troubles. Words spoken cannot be taken back, and so it is that rash words inflict wounds (Prov. 12:18) and start fights (Prov. 18:6).

May we set a trap over our mouths, so that slander, belittling, rash or mocking words will never pass our lips.

Dreams of making it rich

After about six months aboard, the ship was ready to sail for Africa when the captain died. Newton knew that his replacement, the mate, would have happily sent him back to the Royal Navy if the chance arose, but Newton was determined to remain in Africa.

Newton had dreams of improving his fortune by joining the slave traders who had settled on the coastal areas of West Africa. There they purchased slaves in order to sell them to ships "at an advanced price."

As it happened, there was a man aboard who was a slave trader returning to Africa.² This man “had acquired considerable wealth” and he inspired Newton. The slave trader planned to build a base to sell slaves from, and so, arriving on the Island of Benanoes, Sierra Leone, towards the end of 1745, Newton obtained a discharge from the ship, and entered into his service.



A map of the west coast of Africa from a 1764 edition of Newton's letters

One of the basic principles of life is that we become what we worship. The Lord Jesus told His disciples to lay up treasure in heaven, “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:20-21).” The heart follows its treasures. Newton set his heart on wealth, and sin so blinds us, that it wickedly came at the cost of his fellow image bearers of God.

In a poem entitled *Father forgive them*, based on the Lord Jesus' words in Luke 23:34, Newton wrote,

“Father, forgive,” (the Saviour said),
 “They know not what they do:”
 His heart was moved when thus he prayed
 For me, my friends, and you.

He saw that as the Jews abused

² Newton's letter does not mention this man's name, but probably it was Patrick Clow – a known slave trader of Sierra Leone.

*And crucified his flesh;
So he, by us, would be refused,
And crucified afresh.*

*Through love of sin, we long were prone
To act as Satan bid;
But now with grief and shame we own,
We knew not what we did.*

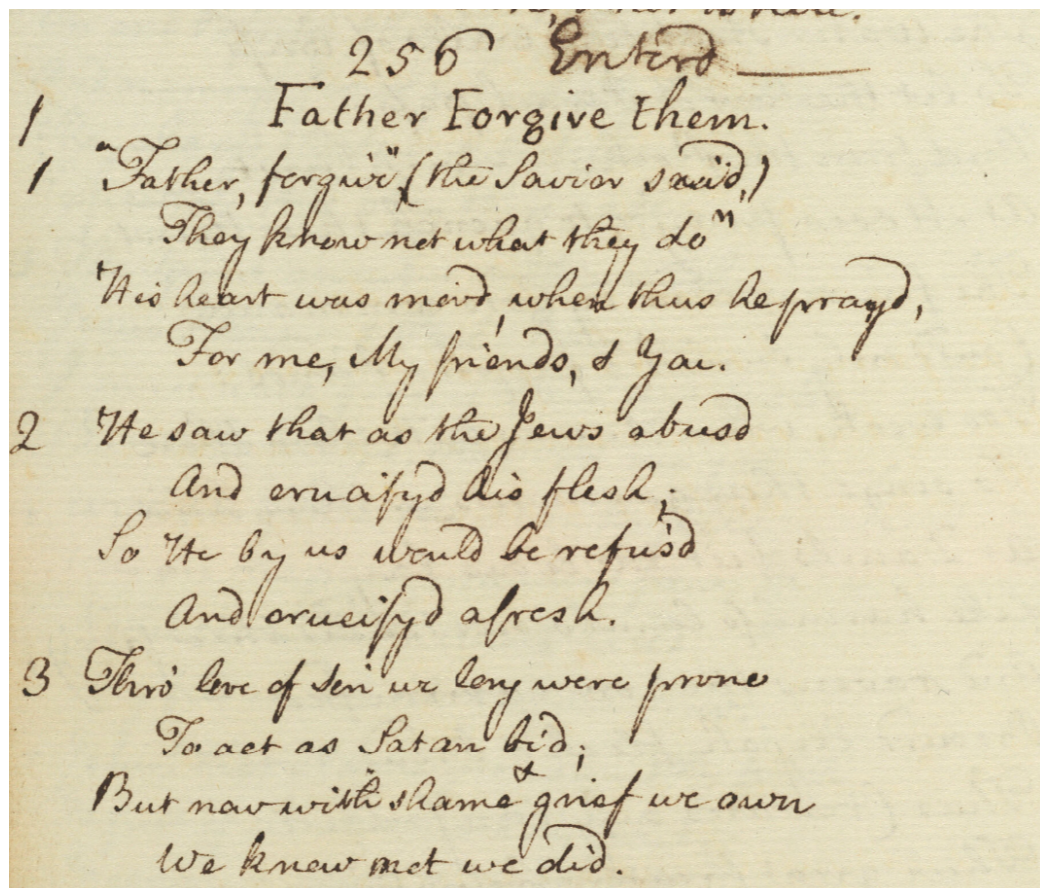
*We knew not the desert of sin,
Nor whom we thus defied;
Nor where our guilty souls had been,
If Jesus had not died.*

*We knew not what a law we broke,
How holy, just, and pure!
Nor what a God we durst provoke,
But thought ourselves secure.*

*But Jesus all our guilt foresaw,
And shed his precious blood,
To satisfy the holy law,
And make our peace with God.*

*My sin, dear Saviour, made thee bleed,
Yet didst thou pray for me!
I knew not what I did, indeed,
When ignorant of thee.*

- John Newton, Olney Hymns, hymn 109, *Father forgive them*



Newton, John, 1725-1807. Olney hymns :
 manuscript, 1777-1779. MS Eng 1317. Houghton
 Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.