

## John Newton – Letter V

*I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

*What is crooked cannot be made straight,  
and what is lacking cannot be counted.*

- Ecclesiastes 1:14-15

### An infected sinner

Newton was 20 years old when he arrived at the coast of Sierra Leone, west Africa, yet the following two years of his life were “an absolute blank.” He lived a miserable existence, suffering illness, ridicule, starvation, mistrust and exposure to the elements.

The Lord Jesus diagnosed the human problem as being our hearts:

“What comes out of a person is what defiles him. <sup>21</sup> For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup> coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person (Mark 7:20-23).”

Newton saw the dreadful state of the human heart “when left to itself.” Yet, sin never likes to be left to itself – it is social and pathogenic - and so, like someone “infected with a pestilence,” he started “spreading a taint” wherever he went.

In the end, Newton’s sinful life left him with the stains of regret and shame that long remained. In this way, sin promises a bright future, but it has a way of de-humanising us, and causing havoc.

## Thankful for failure

In hindsight, Newton realised that if he had become the successful man that he hoped to be in the world, then in fact, his “sad story would probably have been worse.” His sinful life would have caused much damage, whereas being in such an isolated place, the damage was comparatively limited.

Sadly, he was surrounded by people whose behaviour was just as depraved as his own. In his pride, he wanted their respect and admiration, but he was “shunned and despised.” It’s at this point in his letter, that Newton recalls Ezekiel 16, about the LORD’s saving care of His unloved people – the people of Jerusalem.

They were like an abandoned newborn baby, but He lovingly took them in, and cared for them. Newton understood himself in the same way: “And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ (Ezek. 16:6)”

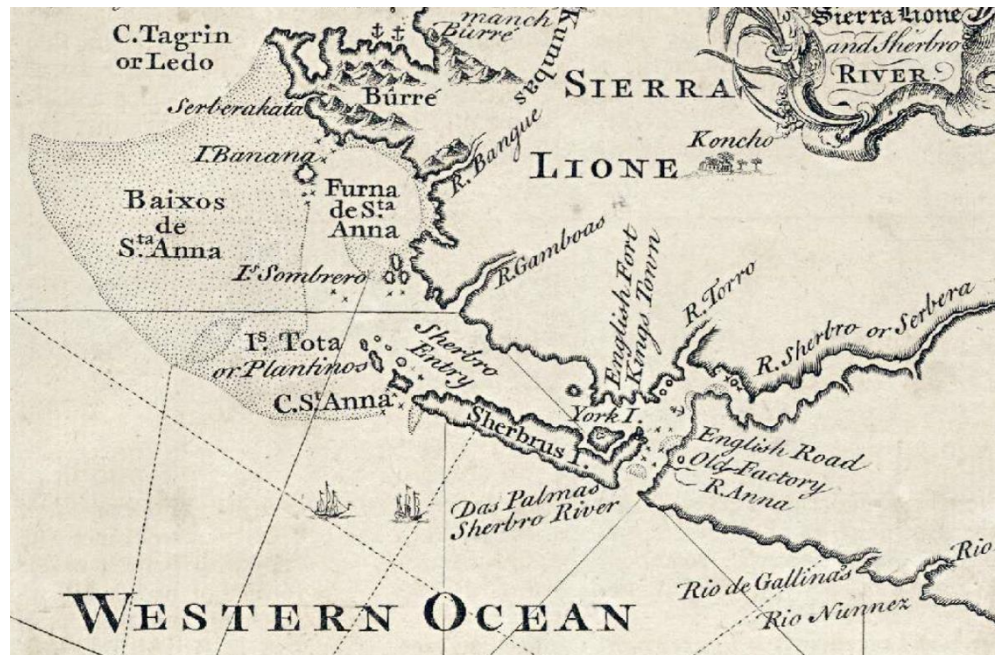
In the mystery of God, it would still be many years before Newton came under God’s saving grace – but he understood that even at this point in his life, God “bade me live.”

## Geography

The geography of Africa’s west coast was to play its part in Newton’s story. He describes the many coastal rivers that empty into the sea. The rugged mountains that formed the peninsula of Sierra Leone were uninhabited, and a natural barrier between the coast and the inland parts. One of the rivers, Rio Nuna, formed a northern border, which he and companions did not cross in their wicked trade.

Further south, are three islands called the Benanoes (Banana Islands), "about twenty miles in circuit" – and further south from them is the

northern entrance to the Sherbro sound and river, where there are another three islands, known as the Plantanes. Newton says that despite the relative obscurity of this stretch of coastline – "rivers unknown to song" – he long remembered them as part of his story.



A Map of the coast of Sierra Leone in 1745, showing "Banana" and "Plantinos" islands, and the Sherbro sound and river.

### His master and his wife, "P.I."

Newton's master had settled on the largest island of the Plantanes – a "low, sandy island, about two miles in circumference, and almost covered with palm-trees." From the outset, they began to build a house and "to enter upon trade" – buying and selling slaves.

Newton's master lived with an African princess as his wife, who he does not name in this letter. However, in a later letter to his wife, he said that her name was pronounced "P.I." with the letters said distinctly.

For some unknown reason, she disliked Newton from outset. Then, to make matters worse, Newton was struck down with illness, which caused a burning fever and left him weak and feeble. Although at first he received some care, soon he was neglected,

and even had difficulty getting water to drink. He was left to lay on a mat, spread on "a board or chest, and a log of wood my pillow."

When Newton's appetite at last returned, he was given little to eat. His master's wife mocked him, by sending him the scraps from her own plate. One time, he was so weak that he dropped the plate, "but she had the cruelty to laugh at my disappointment."

### Eating raw vegetable

Soon Newton's situation became desperate. At night he would go to the plantation in search of a root vegetable, which he ate raw. Although this vegetable was wholesome when cook, it was not suitable "to be eaten raw in any quantity, as a potato." Some of the "slaves in the chain" had pity on him, and they would secretly share with him from their own pittance of food.

Our pride, like a sore bruise, is hurt every time it is knocked. Yet, instead of dealing with the source of our pride and healing the wound, we cherish our pride. Pride is "making our door high" – making ourselves look tall, but it will only end in ruining us (Prov. 17:19). Pride tells us that we not getting what we think that we deserve.

Pride is also an unsatiable sin – whilst ever we hold on to it, it is never satisfied. Newton said that whilst his physical circumstances were difficult, it was being treated with scorn and contempt by others that he found equally difficult. His master's wife continued to insult him: she would "call me worthless and indolent."

Sometimes, whilst he was still recovering from the illness, she would force him to get up and walk, as those around would mimic his faltering steps, and laugh at his pathetic condition. Newton's pride was stinging, yet he was still far from God.

### Cruelty and mocking

The Bible speaks often in the Proverbs about cruelty and mocking. The righteous show regard for God's creation, but the wicked show cruelty disguised as mercy (Prov.12:10), such as Newton's master's wife. She and her companions may have felt comradery in mockery, yet cruelty, like all sin, undoes relationships, destroying true peace (Prov. 17:19). Nothing good is gained from cruelty (Prov. 11:17).

In contrast, kindness is a sincere desire for the good of others, borne out of concern for their welfare. The Bible says that God is kind: "How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings (Ps. 36:7)." It says that, "Love is patient and kind (1 Cor. 13:4)." Kindness is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives (Gal. 5:22).

### Master returns

Newton's master had been away for some time, and when he returned, Newton complained to him about his mistreatment. Yet, his words fell on deaf ears, and to make matters worse, his master's wife heard his complaint, so that Newton "fared no better for it."

Not long after this, his master left for a second voyage along one of the coastal rivers, and Newton accompanied him. At first, all went well, until another trader turned his master against Newton, by convincing him that Newton had stolen goods during the night. Newton says that of all the things for which he was guilty, this was the one thing of which he was innocent! Yet all this goes to show, is that integrity ought never be in part, but the whole.

Despite his protested innocence, the accusation clung to him, and as a consequence, whenever his master went ashore, Newton was locked up on the deck of the boat with only "a pint of rice for my day's allowance." His only relief to help his hunger was to fish from the vessel, when the tide was right. Whenever he succeeded in catching a fish, he hastily cooked and ate it.

### A tiger tamed by hunger

It was in this miserable way that, sometimes, Newton would spend “twenty, thirty, perhaps near forty hours.” On the boat’s deck, he was exposed to the rain. His only clothing was “a shirt, a pair of trousers, a cotton handkerchief” which he wore like a hat, as well as “a cotton cloth about two yards long,” which he wore around his upper body. Newton said that soon “quite broke my constitution and my spirits.”

The journey lasted for about two months, during which time Newton’s master presumably traded in slaves. When they returned to Plantanes, Newton continued in his master’s service. He was humbled, but “not to a wholesome repentance, not to the language of the prodigal.” He was disheartened and melancholic. Life had lost its lustre, and he compared himself to a tiger, tamed by hunger.

### Humbled, but not changed

There is a type of repentance can keep a person out of the Kingdom of God. More accurately, it is called “worldly grief” and it leads to death (2 Cor 7:10). A person may show remorse for their situation or behaviour, yet fall short of repentance before God. They don’t truly turn from sin to God, and it does nothing to change the heart.

It may be that, like a wasp sting, sin can hurt us, and instead of driving us to the Healer, we stay away, rubbing our wound. In this way, a little repentance can be a dangerous thing. In contrast, “godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret (2 Cor. 7:10).”

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), question 88, asks: “What is involved in genuine repentance or conversion? The dying-away of the old self, and the rising-to-life of the new.” It explains that this means genuine sorrow for sin, and to more and more hate and flee from sin. This goes hand in hand with “wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a love and delight to live according” to God’s

will (question 90).

At this point in his life, Newton was humbled by life's circumstances - things hadn't turned out as he had planned – and yet, he was still far from the Kingdom.

### Learning Euclid's geometry

Despite Newton's pitiful condition, he taught himself geometry, using a book by the ancient mathematician Euclid. It was the only book that he owned, and sitting by the sea on an isolated part of the island, he used a stick to draw mathematical diagrams in the sand. Soon, Newton says, "I made myself, in a good measure, a master of the first six books of Euclid."

Despite this good use of his mind, the letter closes with very little spiritual food to savour.

### Meaningless! Meaningless!

Newton wanted to be someone in life, but his experiences of disappointment echo Solomon's search in Ecclesiastes. Newton's chase for riches had led him to this miserable position:

"<sup>9</sup> Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind (Ecc. 6:9)."

Later in life, Newton wrote a poem entitled *Vanity of Life*;

*The evils that beset our path  
Who can prevent or cure?  
We stand upon the brink of death  
When most we seem secure.*

*If we today sweet peace possess,  
It soon may be withdrawn;  
Some change may plunge us in distress,*

*Before tomorrow's dawn.*

*Disease and pain invade our health  
And find an easy prey;  
And oft, when least expected, wealth  
Takes wings and flies away.*

*A fever or a blow can shake  
Our wisdom's boasted rule;  
And of the brightest genius make  
A madman or a fool.*

*The gourds, from which we look for fruit,  
Produce us only pain;  
A worm unseen attacks the root,  
And all our hopes are vain.*

*I pity those who seek no more  
Than such a world can give;  
Wretched they are, and blind, and poor,  
And dying while they live.*

*Since sin has filled the earth with woe,  
And creatures fade and die;  
Lord wean our hearts from things below,  
And fix our hopes on high.*

- John Newton, Olney Hymns, hymn 54, *Vanity of Life*