

John Newton – Letter VII

*God looks down from heaven
on the children of man
to see if there are any who understand,
who seek after God.*

*They have all fallen away;
together they have become corrupt;
there is none who does good,
not even one.*

- Psalm 53:2-3

Rebuked by a sinful man

The ship that Newton joined, *Greyhound*, was a trading ship, which had already been in Africa for “four or five months.” The ship’s desired cargo was gold, ivory, dyers wood, and bees wax – some of which was to play an important part in the storm that they soon encountered. For a year, the *Greyhound* continue trading on along the African coast, with Newton saying that “it requires much longer time to collect a cargo of this sort than of slaves.”

The captain of the ship had already shown himself willing to deceive in order to get what he wanted, and additionally, he was prone to outbursts. As for Newton, his days on the ship were idle, with little more than studying mathematics for his amusement, occupying his time.

A Jonah on board

Newton says of himself at this time: “my whole life, when awake, was a course of most horrid impiety and profaneness. I know not that I have ever since met so daring a blasphemer.” His creativity only went to further his depravity, and thus, sin begets sin, which begets sin.

In Jonah 1:7, the pagan sailors cast lots to see whose fault it was that calamity had come upon them. The lot fell on Jonah. Newton himself was "often seriously reproved" by the captain for his behaviour. The captain was himself far from God. Furthermore, the captain would often call Newton "Jonah" – saying, "he had a Jonah on board," because it was as though a curse followed Newton wherever he went.



Jonah and the Whale, by Mulier, Pieter; Tavella, Carlo Antonio; mid-17th century

Sin is never stable, but it continues to eat into our lives. James speaks of this: "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death (James 1:14-15)." It is folly to think that we can control it.

Heroes of the drink

Certain sins tempt each of us more than others, so that no two people are necessarily alike, and yet sin ruins us all. Newton said that he was never "fond of drinking" – and, in fact, his father still held some hope for him, while ever he stayed away from the drink. Yet, he loved to encourage others to drink. Grievously, he admitted: "I would promote a drinking-bout for a frolic's sake... [I] delighted in mischief."

The Lord Jesus spoke some of His most sobering words to His disciples, telling them that it is impossible to escape temptations to sin whilst ever we are in this world, "but woe to the one through whom they come! ²It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin (Luke 17:1-2)."

God gives “wine to gladden the heart of man (Ps. 104:15)” - but it can easily cause a myriad of problems: “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise (Prov. 20:1).”

One time, Newton himself decided to join in the drinking: “four or five of us one evening sat upon deck, to see who could hold out longest in drinking Geneva and rum alternately; a large sea-shell supplied the place of a glass.” Soon Newton lost control of himself, as he “danced about the deck like a madman.” Then, his hat fell overboard, and by the light of the moon he saw the small boat that trailed behind the ship.

It was not uncommon for sailors such as Newton, to not know how to swim, yet he was about to throw himself over the side of the ship in order to retrieve his hat, when somebody dragged him away from the side. Newton saw this as an escape, for he could not swim sober, let alone drunk, the rest of the ship’s company were asleep, and his companions were too intoxicated to save him.

Another time, at Cape Lopez, Newton and his companions shot a “buffalo or wild cow.” They marked the spot, and then returned the following evening to bring it back to the ship. However, they soon lost their way in the swamp and jungle, and were without “light, food, nor arms.” Eventually, the clouds cleared, the moon rose, and they were able to find their way to the coast – and their ship – a considerable distance away.

Hard as brass

It was during this time, that Newton’s conscience, having “grown weaker and weaker, at length entirely ceased.” He was hardened to the point that God’s judgment or mercy “made the least impression on me.”

In the Old Testament God’s people were stiff-necked (Ex. 32:9), had foreheads as hard as brass (Is. 48:4), stubborn hearts (Ezek. 3:7), and hearts of stone (Ezek. 36:22). In fact, they were like a valley of

dry bones with no possibility of life (Ezek. 37:1-2). The Apostle Paul warned that there are those who “have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity (Eph. 4:19).” He spoke of people who were connected to the churches of Crete, and yet, “their consciences are defiled (Tit. 1:15).” Others had known the truth of God, yet they wandered away and their consciences were seared (1 Tim. 4:2). Like a burn or a scar that leaves our flesh without feeling, so too we can lose our spiritual and moral sensitivity.

Avoiding God

It was in this condition, that the *Greyhound*, having completed her trading business, set sail for England in January 1748. Trade winds meant that she sailed close to the coast of Brazil, then north to Newfoundland, before on 1st March “with a hard gale of wind, westerly,” they were pushed “fast homewards.” Newton estimated the journey to be “perhaps more than seven thousand miles.”

The journey had been uneventful, until about 9th March when something made Newton think of God. On board the ship was *The Imitations of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471). Newton carelessly opened the book, as he had done many times before, simply to pass the time, but then it struck him, “What if these things should be true?”

He couldn’t bear this thought, and so he closed the book. He was evasive. Although his conscience testified to him that it was true, he dismissed it, and soon joined the conversation aboard the ship.

A storm

Yet, this time the Lord would not let Newton rest – “but now the Lord’s time was come” – and that night as he went to bed, still secure in himself and indifferent to God, he was woken by a violent storm. The ocean waves broke over the deck of the ship and began

to fill the cabin where he lay. Then someone on the deck cried out that the ship was going down.

As quickly as possible, Newton dressed and as he was climbing the ladder to the deck, the captain met him and told him to bring a knife. Whilst Newton went for the knife, another man climbed the ladder before him, but was immediately washed overboard. Nothing could be done to "lament" the poor man, and in fact, those aboard soon expected to be sunk themselves.

Newton said, "The ship was filling with water very fast" and she was starting to break apart as the "upper timbers on one side" were torn away. A futile effort was made to pump the sea water out, and Newton with "eleven or twelve" others "were set to baling in another part of the vessel" with buckets and pails. In another mysterious act of God's providence, the ship's cargo of bees wax and wood helped keep her afloat.

Towards dawn, after "about an hour's time" of struggle, the wind died down. Newton says, "most of our clothes and bedding" was used to "stop the leaks," being nailed in place with wooden boards. The weather was "exceedingly cold, especially to us, who had so lately left a hot climate," but they had managed to stop the water from filling the ship.



An illustration from an 1825 edition of Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton by Richard Cecil, showing Newton in the storm

A hypocrite prays

At first, the terrifying excitement of the situation left Newton unaffected by this brush with death. In fact, he told one of his companions that "in a few days this distress would serve us to talk of over a glass of wine; but he being a less hardened sinner than myself, replied, with tears, "No; it is too late now.""

About nine o'clock in the morning, Newton spoke with the captain and then made the comment: "If this will not do, the Lord have mercy upon us." It was the first time in many years that a cry for mercy had passed his lips, but the hypocrisy of his life struck him: "What mercy can there be for me?"

Newton spent the rest of the morning at the pump, where "almost every passing wave" broke over his head. In fact, he and those with him, had to tie themselves down with ropes, in order to keep from being washed away.

Every time the ship descended the ocean waves, Newton dreaded that she would not rise. He now feared death – "and my heart foreboded the worst, if the scriptures, which I had long since opposed, were indeed true." Yet he was still "but half convinced" of the truth of God. He was caught in "a sullen frame, a mixture of despair and impatience. I thought, if the Christian religion was true, I could not be forgiven."

Close to the Kingdom, yet resisting

At this point, Newton was still outside the Kingdom of God, despite his thoughts beginning to turn to God. Many people can be close to the Kingdom, but not in it. They may know much truth about God, and even at times appear to draw so close as to be able to reach out and touch it, and yet always remain outside the borders of His refuge.

In Acts 26, the Apostle Paul had the opportunity to speak before King Agrippa. Agrippa and his wife, Bernice, had entered the audience hall with great pomp (Acts 25:23). When Paul spoke of

the Christ's suffering, resurrection and message of light, he was accused by Festus of being out of his mind. But Paul said that the gospel message is "true and rational," before saying: "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." Agrippa replied: "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian? (Acts 26:23-28)" He appeared to be close, and yet at that point in time, was reluctant to come any closer.

Some people are affected by preaching, only to leave and any effect is worn off. Others will acknowledge their sin, yet it is not true repentance (2 Cor. 7:10), and there can be those with a faith that does not justify (James 2:19).

Newton had begun to think of ultimate things, yet was still only half-convinced, and outside the Kingdom.

Unbelief is the great sin

Newton's reluctance was, in part, because he believed that he could not be forgiven. He was caught in the net of guilt and shame, and it is a tight net drawn by the Devil. Yet, the greater sin is unbelief itself!

God's Word assures even the worst of sinners can be forgiven, through the redemption purchased by Christ Jesus at the cross. God's grace more than covers the worst of sins:

²⁰Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 5:20-21).

Years later, Newton was surely reflecting on his own life when he wrote:

Lord, thou hast won, at length I yield,

*My heart, by mighty grace compelled,
Surrenders all to thee;
Against thy terrors long I strove,
But who can stand against thy love?
Love conquers even me.*

*All that a wretch could do, I tried,
Thy patience scorned, thy pow'r defied,
And trampled on thy laws;
Scarcely thy martyrs at the stake,
Could stand more steadfast for thy sake,
Than I in Satan's cause.*

*But since thou hast thy love revealed,
And shown my soul a pardon sealed,
I can resist no more:
Couldst thou for such a sinner bleed?
Canst thou for such a rebel plead?
I wonder and adore!*

*If thou hadst bid thy thunders roll,
And lightnings flash to blast my soul,
I still had stubborn been:
But mercy has my heart subdued,
A bleeding Savior I have viewed,
And now, I hate my sin.*

- John Newton, Olney Hymns, hymn 121, *Lord, thou hast won,
at length I yield*