

John Newton – Letter VI

*Behold, it was for my welfare
that I had great bitterness;
but in love you have delivered my life
from the pit of destruction,
for you have cast all my sins
behind your back.*

- Isaiah 38:17

Citrus trees

Newton's earthly fortunes were to change in the coming year. His misery was soon changed to optimism, and yet he was still far from acknowledging the Lord.

Newton's cruel master set him to work planting young citrus trees – "lime or lemon." Mockingly, he said to Newton: "Who knows but by the time these trees grow up and bear, you may go home to England, obtain the command of a ship, and return to reap the fruits of your labours; we see strange things sometimes happen." Although it was said sarcastically, his words proved true, and several years later Newton did return as captain of a ship to pluck some of the fruit of those citrus trees.



Hateful and hating one another

Yet for the time being, Newton's situation was grim. During the night, he would steal away to wash his only shirt on the rocks, then return to his bed, wearing the wet shirt. He hid from strangers who arrived by boat to the island, because he was ashamed of his condition. Yet, even worse than his outward condition, was the moral and spiritual state of his soul.

In Titus 3:3, the Apostle Paul says of those who now belong to Christ, that “we ourselves were once... hated by others and hating one another.” That was until “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared” and He saved us (Tit. 3:4-5). For now, however, Newton saw himself as one those swallowed up by hatred.

Christian hindsight

In this letter, Newton teaches us the importance of hindsight for our Christian growth. So too, the Apostle Paul had the ability of Christian hindsight. He asked the Christians in Rome to look back at who they were before knowing Christ, and then to look at who they are now, and to have no regret:

“²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life (Rom. 6:20-22).”

The mind without God cannot truly exalt in the heights of science, music, poetry, history, or mathematics, because although we can discover marvellous things and be creative, we are still slaves of sin.

Yet, with hindsight, we are to see that God is our master, and His authority over us leaves no regret within us. But how did this change happen? Paul says that the Holy Spirit frees us from our old master, to our new master: “the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2).”

Newton understood that it was God’s grace working throughout the circumstances of his life, and especially, His grace in loving his soul that protected him. In hindsight, he saw four benefits that God worked in his life;

- He “gave me favour in the sight of others.”

- He “raised me new friends.”
- He “protected and guided me through a long series of dangers.”
- And He “crowned every day with repeated mercies. To him I owe it that I am still alive.”

Yet, over and above these benefits, God gave Newton “the knowledge of knowledge of himself, in the person of Jesus Christ; in love to my soul he delivered me from the pit of corruption, and cast all my aggravated sins behind his back.”

When the Lord Jesus sent out His disciples, and they returned with marvellous stories of all that they had seen and done, He said to them: “²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20).” The joy of *being* a Christian far outweighs any other benefits that may come from God.

A lifeline from his father

Newton continued to live, humiliated, under his cruel master for “near a twelvemonth.” It was during this time that in desperation he wrote “two or three times” to his father, explaining his situation and asking for his father’s help. Newton said that he would not return to England, unless his father was willing for him to come. He also wrote to Mary during this time, kindling some hope that they would be united in the future.



Newton could not have known this at the time, but his father received at least one of his letters, and he was able to use his maritime connections in Liverpool to give orders to a trading ship that was soon sailing to West Africa. As a result, Newton’s life was soon to take another major turn.

Wretch enough to think myself happy

In the meantime, however, Newton's life did improve. He was able to secure a transfer from his cruel master to another slave trader on the same island. Newton said: "I was soon decently clothed, lived in plenty, was considered as a companion, and trusted with the care of all his domestic effects."

In addition, Newton was soon appointed to one of the trader's business interests on the river Kittam, where he was made joint-manager. Newton's life of misery was turning around: "we lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied. Here I began to be wretch enough to think myself happy."

In fact, Newton became so contented with life, that he wondered about staying in West Africa permanently. In part, he realised that this feeling of contentment was due to him giving up on his dreams of ever returning to England to achieve what he had once hoped to achieve. Perhaps, it was better to be satisfied with lesser dreams.

All this goes to show how far Newton truly was from God. Perhaps, at this point in his life, his unregenerate soul was experiencing something that we too ought to realise: that in failure and success, all is vanity more or less. Failure can crush us, and yet success can be worse. Newton's current contentment seemed to be happiness at his success, mixed with the bitter acceptance that his dreams were crushed. Neither failure nor success can answer the deep questions of life, or give what only God can give.

Jeremiah Burroughs (1600-1646) spoke of a contentment of a different nature:

"I see that it is not necessary for me to be rich, but it is necessary for me to make my peace with God; it is not necessary that I have a pleasurable life in the world, but it is absolutely necessary that I should have a pardon for my sin; it is

not necessary that I should have honour and preferment, but it is necessary that I should have Christ as my portion, and have my part in Jesus Christ; and that I should be saved on the last day."

The ship arrives!

Unawares to Newton, the ship from Liverpool with orders from Newton's father arrived at the island where Newton had been under his first cruel master, and from where he had sent his letters. However, when the captain heard that Newton was no longer there, he thought "no more about me."

Yet, Newton could see God's sovereign hand over his life in placing him at Kittam, for although he was "more than a hundred miles" from the where the river met the sea, the course of the river followed the coastline, and so he was still within a mile of the coast of West Africa. Additionally, Newton was supposed to have left for a trading journey a day or two earlier, but he had instead decided to postpone the journey in order to obtain some goods from the next passing ship.

Sometimes, he would sometimes walk to the beach in order to make contact with passing ships, although often ships sailed by unseen, because they travelled at night or were too far out to sea. Yet, in February 1747, a fellow servant of Newton's was walking to the beach when he saw a ship passing by, and using smoke, he signalled to the ship that they wished to trade. If this servant had been only half an hour later, it would have been too late to signal the ship.

The ship, however, came to anchor, and the servant rowed a canoe to her, where he learned that it was the very ship from Liverpool that had orders concerning Newton. The captain himself came ashore to meet Newton, and to deliver the message from his father, and yet remarkably, Newton's contentment with his current life was such, that at first he was indifferent to the message.

A persuasive lie

Perhaps, sensing Newton's reluctance to leave, the captain told Newton that his father had said that an annual sum of £.400 had been left to Newton as an inheritance. Newton did have some expectation of an inheritance from a relative. In addition, the captain said that his orders from Newton's father were such that if Newton was in "any way embarrassed," then the captain was to redeem Newton, even at the cost of half of the ship's cargo. Newton later learned, however, that the captain, being unwilling to leave Newton behind, had fabricated these stories!

Whatever the case, it was not a desire to see his father that compelled Newton to join the ship, but the prospect that in returning to England – especially if there was an inheritance waiting for him – he may be able to marry Mary. And so it was, as Newton says, "I was suddenly freed from a captivity of about fifteen months. I had neither a thought nor a desire of this change one hour before it took place. I embarked with him, and in a few hours lost sight of Kittam."

Understanding the Providence of God

The Scriptures are full of evidence of God's providence. The Westminster Confession summarises this:

"God the great Creator of all things does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy (WCF 5.1)."

He is the "first Cause" of all things, whilst establishing secondary causes (WCF 5.2). This means that "God, in His ordinary

providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure (WCF 5.3)."

Blind to God

At this point in Newton's life, he was blind to God, and could not see His silent hand behind all that happened. The unbeliever is blind:

"How much is their blindness to be pitied, who can see nothing but chance in events of this sort. So blind and stupid was I at that time, I made no reflection. I sought no direction in what had happened; like a wave of the sea driven with the wind, and tossed, I was governed by present appearances and looked no further. But he, who is eyes to the blind, was leading me in a way that I knew not."

The silent hand of God

In 2 Chronicles 10, life in the kingdom of Israel was difficult for all who trusted in the covenant promises of the LORD. King Rehoboam rejected the wisdom of older men, and instead listened to the folly of his younger friends who advised him to be harsh towards the people: "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to it (2 Chron. 10:14). And yet, God was sovereign even over this wicked king, for it says: "So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by God that the Lord might fulfill his word (2 Chron. 10:15)." Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."

So too, in the story of Esther, we are to trace God's silent hand behind all the events that unfolded, even though God's name is not mentioned once. The lesson is that the sun always shines with radiant brightness, even when it seems hidden from us. So too, God always reigns by His providence.

Newton saw that, “the ruling power and wisdom of God is most evidently displayed in human affairs.” In this letter, he traced the most significant moment in redemption history – the appearing of the promised Saviour, Jesus Christ – down through history to the dream of Joseph, the son of Isaac, who if he had not dreamed, or told his dream to his brothers, then the promises and purposes of God would have failed.

All things work together...

By the end of this letter, Newton followed the captain and joined the trading ship, *Greyhound*, which would eventually return him to England. He travelled as a passenger, and even enjoyed lodging in the captain’s cabin, and dined at his table.

Yet, Newton’s final lesson is this: “What a comfortable thought is this to a believer to know, that amidst all the various interfering designs of men, the Lord has one constant design which he cannot, will not miss, namely, his own glory in the complete salvation of his people; and that he is wise, and strong, and faithful, to make even those things, which seem contrary to this design, subservient to promote it.”

Thus, Newton echoes the answer to the first Heidelberg Catechism;

Question: What is our only comfort in live and death?

Answer: That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death - to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has delivered me from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.