John Newton – Letter VIII

And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you.

- Deuteronomy 8:2

An anniversary

Anniversaries are usually marked with emotion, often sadness or happiness. For some believers, a moment of significant spiritual experience becomes etched in the minds for the rest of their life. In Genesis 32, Jacob wrestled with "a man" – later revealed to be God. He was left with a limp. He had seen God face-to-face, and yet he had been delivered (Gen. 32:30). He the occasion was of such significance that he named the place "Peniel," meaning, "the face of God (Gen. 32:30)."

Although it may be helpful to be able to recall such clear spiritual experiences, it is not necessary for our salvation to know when or how God's grace began in our lives. What matters is that the light of Christ is within us (John 8:12), not where or how that light began.

Yet, for Newton, 21st March 1748 (or 10th March by the older Julian calendar) became an anniversary. It was "a day much to be remembered by me, and I have never suffered it to pass wholly unnoticed since the year 1748. On that day the Lord sent from on high, and delivered me out of the deep waters."

Time to think

For the time being, the ship that he was aboard, the *Greyhound*, was still in danger. Newton worked at the pump "from three in the morning till near noon, and then I could do no more." Exhausted, he lay down to rest, but he was soon called back to

help. Being too fatigued to work the pump again, he went to the helm, where he steered the ship until midnight.

In this way, Newton had time to reflect upon his life. Often when we are left to ourselves our thoughts unsettle us. For Newton, several thoughts now consumed him, including;

- The times in the past where he had promised to follow Christ;
- The "extraordinary turns" in his life, which if any one of them had turned out differently, then his circumstances would have changed;
- The times when he had received warnings, and other times when his life had been saved;
- And the vile words that came from his tongue - especially, his "profane ridicule" of the gospel.

Mixed with these thoughts, Newton also began to think that the gospel could be true! Yet, his sin, and the way that he had squandered every spiritual privilege that he had received, led him to conclude that his sins "were too great to be forgiven."



An illustration from an 1824 edition of Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton by Richard Cecil.

Awful passages

Sometimes God may withhold signs of His grace – and as Newton thought about his state before God, the Bible

seemed to confirm his worst fears. He recalled some "awful passages," such as;

> "For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first."
>
> - 2 Peter 2:20

Doom seemed to be his inevitable fate, or so Newton thought. Steering the ship, he brooded – and yet, as he acknowledged, even then his thoughts about his own sinfulness were "exceedingly faint and disproportionate." He saw but a glimpse of his true state, for if God had allowed him a full view of his condition at that time "I could not have borne the sight." He would have been "crushed as a moth."

In this way, God graciously allowed him to see enough of his sin to warrant severe alarm, yet not enough to crush him without hope of Christ. It was only years later that Newton understood "the infinite righteousness and grace of Christ Jesus, my Lord."

The lesson for us is this: God allows us to see only a small proportion of our sinfulness, according to His wisdom. If we were to see too much of it, then it may crush us under a weight of despair. Correspondingly, God also allows us to discover His grace bit by bit, for surely, to see the depths of His grace all at once would, likewise, overwhelm us!

I began to pray

A young child doesn't learn to walk at once, but only after many falls and spills. So too, with prayer. About six o'clock in the evening, Newton heard that "the ship was freed from water." Hope started to rise, and "I thought I saw the hand of God displayed in our favour."

It was then that Newton started to pray. There are few more unpleasant sounds in nature than the caw of a raven, and Newton's first prayers reminded him of its ugly cry. He was not, at this stage, praying "the prayer of faith"– nor, did he call God his father. He knew enough to realise that he was still not reconciled to God, and yet he prayed, for he said that the Lord even hears the raven's cry.

Then Newton thought of Jesus: His life, His death for sins not His own, but for all who in their distress "should put their trust in him." In one of Newton's later poems, he imagined standing near the cross;

In evil long I took delight,
Unawed by shame or fear;
Till a new object struck my sight,
And stopped my wild career.

I saw one hanging on a tree,
In agonies and blood;
Who fixed his languid eyes on me,
As near his cross I stood.

Sure, never till my latest breath,
Can I forget that look;
It seemed to charge me with his death,
Though not a word he spoke.

My conscience felt, and owned the guilt,
And plunged me in despair;
I saw my sins his blood had spilt,
And helped to nail him there.

- *John Newton, Olney Hymns, hymn 57, Looking at the Cross*

The comfortless principles of infidelity

In Romans 8:15, the Apostle Paul assures Christians: “you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”” Elsewhere, he speaks of Gentiles as “having no hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12).” Without God, fear and hopelessness are the logical outlook of life.

Despite Newton’s faltering prayer, “the comfortless principles of infidelity” were still deeply rooted within him. He sought evidence of Christ – and “the great question now was how to obtain faith.” At this point, he had not taken hold of Christ, but was looking for a reason to believe, and the assurance that the Scriptures were from God.

At this moment, one of the keys for Newton was the promise of Christ in Luke 11:13, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” He thought: “If this book is true, the promise in this passage must be true likewise; I have need of that very Spirit.” He recognised that the Holy Spirit had "written" God’s Word and therefore, in order to understand it, he needed the Spirit’s help.

Likewise, John 7:17 encouraged him: “If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.” These promises encouraged Newton to study God’s Word, praying for the Spirit’s help, in order to “be more and more confirmed in it.”

In this way, each person’s path towards saving faith will have its own unique steps. Often, the Lord will use one or two verses from the Bible to lead the way.

However, was Newton simply trying to persuade himself that the Bible was true, instead of examining things from a cold, rational point of view? Newton was aware of this criticism, but he saw that God’s help was essential, given the distance between “righteous

God and a sinful soul." He saw that "on every other side I was surrounded with black unfathomable despair." Only God gave hope.

Pigs, sheep and poultry washed overboard

In the meantime, the wind had died down, and those aboard the *Greyhound* began to recover from their brush with death. However, the casks holding their food provisions had been "beaten to pieces" and ruined by sea water. Additionally, all of their "pigs, sheep, and poultry" had been washed overboard.

Their remaining food supplies were mostly fish and lentils – which had been the pigs' food. In total, there was, perhaps, a week's "scanty allowance" of food.

The ship herself was also in poor condition. The sails had mostly been lost, which meant that even when the wind was favourable, they travelled slowly. Yet, the crew thought themselves to be only "a hundred leagues," or 350 miles from land, which gave them hope. Newton now spent his time meditating on the Scriptures, "and praying to the Lord for mercy and instruction."

Land sighted… hopes dashed

One morning four or five days later, joyful shouts from the watchman indicated that he had seen land. Soon everybody was on deck in the dawning light of the day. Newton says: "It seemed a mountainous coast, about twenty miles from us, terminating in a cape or point, and a little farther, two or three small islands, or hummocks, as if just rising out of the water… resembling the north-west extremity of Ireland."

Everybody on board was in high spirits, as they anticipated that they would be on land by the following day. The last of the brandy was passed around, as well as the final pieces bread. They felt that they had escaped the jaws of death.

However, it was to prove a false hope. The ship's mate was the first to suggest that it was not land that they had seen. Newton thought that if anyone else aboard had ventured such an unwelcome comment, then they would have been beaten. But the mate was correct, and as the sun rose, "our fancied islands began to grow red… In a word, we had been prodigal of our bread and brandy too hastily; our land was literally in nubibus, nothing but clouds." Within half an hour, the "land" that they had so confidently seen, disappeared.

Despite this realisation, those aboard were still confident that they were, indeed, close to the coast of Ireland. Yet, later that day, the wind died, and the next day, it turned to blow from the south-east, directly against them – and so it continued for two weeks. Newton said: "In a word, our station was such as deprived us of any hope of being relieved by other vessels."

Desperation

The situation was now desperate. They had only "half of a salted cod" between twelve people, per day. Although they had plenty of fresh water, they had "no bread, hardly any clothes, and very cold weather." They continually worked the pumps in order to keep the ship afloat. One man died under the strain and lack of food.

Yet Newton faced more trouble than others on board, for the captain, "whose temper was quite soured by distress," blamed him as the cause of their problems. Whatever the captain's exact beliefs were, he was "confident that if I was thrown overboard" then the rest of the crew would survive.

Whilst the captain never intended to follow through with this, his continual blaming of Newton, caused Newton distress – and Newton's jilted conscience agreed with the captain! He felt responsible for all the misfortune that the *Greyhound* had suffered. He felt that God had found him out.

The port of Lough Swilly

After two weeks, the wind eventually turned favourable for those aboard. By this stage, the ship was in such poor condition that one side of her was broken, and yet the change in wind helped to keep the broken section out of the water.

With favourable winds, in time they saw the island Tory, six nautical miles off the coast of Ireland. The following day, 8th April 1748, the *Greyhound* anchored in the port of Lough Swilly, and not a moment too soon, for the wind once again turned fierce.



Map of Inishowen, showing loughs Swilly and Foyle and the land around; 1661 Etching. © The Trustees of the British Museum

There is a God that hears

Newton says: "About this time I began to know that there is a God that hears and answers prayer. How many times has he appeared for me since this great deliverance! Yet, alas! How distrustful and ungrateful is my heart unto this hour."

The Lord Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "deliver us from evil (Matt. 6:13)." How often our Heavenly Father has answered that prayer, even whilst we have been unaware, we'll never know this side of heaven. It is enough for us to know that He does answer the prayer.