

# **The Life and Works of John Newton (1725-1807)**

A Study in Five Parts

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*“One of the purest and most unselfish of saints.”*

*“He acquired by indomitable perseverance the attainments requisite for a clergyman—and continued for the space of 44 years one of the most devoted and single-hearted of Christian ministers.”*

Quoted from W. E. H. LECKY,

*“History of England in the Eighteenth Century,”* vol. III, page 134.

## **Introduction**

In the list of well-known evangelical clergy in the Church of England during the latter half of the eighteenth century—not the least influential was John Newton, “sailor, preacher, pastor, poet”—to utilize the title of a volume issued as a memorial to him in 1908—one hundred years after his death.

For many reasons it is worth while studying in detail this remarkable man’s life and character.

(1) There is, to begin with, the unique romance of his life. Ellerton, the hymnologist, wrote of him “John Newton’s early life might form the ground work of a story by Defoe—but that it transcends all fiction.”

This is literally true. Elliot Binns has written “A perusal of the life of John Newton must leave any reader possessed of either sympathy or imagination, with a feeling of wonder and bewilderment that is little short of awe.” Well might Newton paint up over the mantelpiece of his study at Olney, where it still remains, amongst other texts, the words from Deuteronomy, “But thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt and the Lord thy God redeemed thee” (Deut. xv. 15).

(2) Newton was a writer of real power on religious subjects. He was a diligent scribe of sermons, hymns, essays and above all, letters.

No one can read these without paying a tribute to his literary abilities. It is significant that when “Cardiphonia” was republished in the year 1911 (one hundred and twenty years after it was originally issued) Dr. Alexander Whyte, in his preface and appreciation, could call this collection of letters on religion, “An English classic of rare excellence and of very high value.”

(3) Newton exercised a most real influence over his contemporaries—and among them many famous eighteenth and early nineteenth century characters in the literary and religious world of those days. He persuaded William Cowper to write sixty of “The Olney Hymns.” He helped to change the course of the lives of Thomas Scott, the commentator, and Claudius Buchanan, the Indian chaplain and missionary.

It was partly through Newton’s attempt to write “The Review of Ecclesiastical History,” that Joseph Milner published his “Church History.” Above all, he was in his latter years the

spiritual adviser of William Wilberforce. Dr. Coupland, in his well-known life of Wilberforce, draws attention most clearly to the way in which the great liberator was influenced by his conversations with Newton. It is quite a fascinating literary pursuit to tabulate the different references to Newton in the numerous biographies of Newton's contemporaries. Among the most interesting of these are the "conversations" of Newton referred to in Josiah Pratt's "Eclectic Notes."

(4) But the most important fact about John Newton is the plain fact of his conversion. In a particularly convincing sketch of his character by Lacey May, the author writes, "John Newton's conversion is one of the great romances of religion standing side by side in interest, though not in importance, with such dramatic events in religious history as the conversions of St. Paul, St. Augustine, and John Bunyan. If truth is really stranger than fiction—it has rarely been stranger than in the life story of this man who could truthfully describe himself as "a brand plucked from the burning."

John Newton's life story is an outstanding instance of the working of the grace of God. It is precisely because of this that a detailed study of his life is so worth while.

The real interest of a character like that of Newton is from the theological and religious point of view.

"The Doctrine of Grace" is frequently discussed and written about, academically and in textbooks for Christian students. It was discussed, with most harmonious and happy results, at the Edinburgh Conference of 1937. In preparation for that Conference, a volume of 400 pages written by sixteen eminent theologians of many different nationalities, was issued beforehand by the S.C.M. entitled "The Doctrine of Grace." No theological student can peruse that illuminating volume without being edified. But the best way to understand "The Doctrine of Grace" is to reflect on the concrete examples of the working of the Grace of God on men like John Newton.

Canon Smyth—in his recent Birbeck lectures on Charles Simeon—claims that the Church historians who have been parish priests contribute best to an understanding of Church History. In a somewhat similar way—it is true to say that the doctrine of the Grace of God should be approached and studied—not only in abstract doctrinal treatises (though such are obviously necessary), but through the actual concrete examples of changed characters like the subject of these studies. The following study of Newton's life, character, writings, and achievements is an elaboration of these four points.

## PART I

### Early Life and Adventures at Sea

John Newton was born in London on July 24th, 1725. His father was for many years master of a ship in the Mediterranean trade—and for two years was governor of York fort in Hudson Bay, where he died in 1750. He had been educated at a Jesuit College in Spain which accounted a good deal for his somewhat severe, though kind, attitude towards his son.

His mother was a devout Dissenter who attended a certain Dr. Jennings's Chapel—and made it the chief business of her life to bring up her only son in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. She had devoted him from birth to the ministry.

One is naturally reminded of Monica and St. Augustine, and when she died, before her son was seven years old, who will doubt that her prayers still made the difference?

His father married again, and though the son was treated kindly, his further religious, training was little cared for.

His stepmother was the daughter of a grazier at Aveley, in Essex, and later on had a son of her own who engrossed his father's notice—hence John was left much to himself. He went to a boarding school for two years at Stratford—and when he was eleven joined his father's ship at Longreach and made five voyages with him. He spent some time at Alicante, and visited Venice where he experienced a remarkable dream.

In 1743 he was taken on board a naval ship, H.M.S. *Harwich*, by the press-gang. It was at this time, that influenced by "The Characteristics of Shaftesbury" (which he had picked up at a shop in Middleburgh in Holland) to use the phrase of Newton's first biographer, Richard Cecil, "he plunged into infidelity with all his spirit." This book—though it produced no immediate effect—operated like slow poison, and prepared the way for all that followed. He sank into deeper degradation, and threw over all goodness and discipline. When *The Harwich* put in at Plymouth on her way to the East Indies, he tried to desert, was recaptured, marched through the streets like a felon, kept in irons, publicly flogged and degraded from the rank of midshipman to that of a common sailor. Should the recitation of all these details of the early life of Newton seem unnecessary, let it be realized that this is the man who in his latter years became the spiritual counsellor of William Wilberforce.

At Madeira, by a combination of chance and providence, he was transferred to another ship bound for Sierra Leone.

On *The Harwich* he was under some restraint, now among strangers as he said, "he could sin without disguise."

"From this time I was exceedingly vile—little indeed if anything short of that animated description of an almost irrecoverable state described in 2 Peter 2. 14: "Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin, beguiling unstable souls." I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others on every occasion. Among other affronts he composed a song in ridicule of the captain of the ship and taught it to the whole ship's company. The next two years (1745-1747) present an almost incredible story. Instead of sailing home again he persuaded the captain to let him land on the island of Benaoes near Sierra Leone—and entered into the service of a trader in slaves. This man was under the influence of his negro mistress, who bullied Newton, and treated him as a slave. The description which Newton gives of these years does indeed suggest a romance of Defoe. At times he had to go out by night, and pull up roots in the plantation and eat them raw on the spot for fear of being discovered. The slaves were encouraged to mimic him.

On another occasion he was chained to a boat, locked on deck, and saved himself from starving by catching fish with the entrails of a fowl left by his master. And besides this there was the West African fever to endure. Yet the intellectual strain in this man's nature never deserted him.

He had with him on shore one book, Barrow's Euclid, which he had picked up at Plymouth. He would take this to a remote corner of the island, and draw diagrams with a stick on the sand.

"I often beguiled my sorrows, and almost forgot my feelings; and thus without any other assistance I made myself in a good measure master of the first six books of Euclid."

Then came a change for the better, he went to work with another trader and was given a share in the management of a factory.

In 1747 came a greater change still. His father had sent a vessel to enquire of his whereabouts, and if possible to bring him home. And in February—again through a combination of chance and Providence—he was enabled to leave the African coast.

After a year's trading this ship reached Ireland in April, and later, Liverpool at the end of May. Almost on the same day he arrived, his father sailed to take up his new post as governor in Hudson Bay. These facts help to explain the change that came over his mind. This change did not come in a flash—but by degrees and stages—from about March, 1748, and the days following—and the process throws much light on the psychology of conversion. The change began when Newton took up Thomas à Kempis, "to pass away the time, and read the book indifferently." As he read the thought occurred, "What if these things should be true?" The next day, March 21<sup>st</sup>, an unusual storm was encountered and Newton took his turn at the pumps. Then occurred what must be termed an instance of genuine psychological disclosure.

Spent with cold and labour he remarked to the captain, "If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us." This thought (expressed without reflection) was the first desire Newton had breathed for mercy for many years. And then another thought came into his mind, "What mercy can there be for me?" Newton always regarded March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1748 as a day to be remembered, and never suffered the day to pass unnoticed.

From now he started to study the New Testament—and found—as millions have found—that the scriptures were "able to make men wise unto salvation."

Here should be emphasized a point of importance; the sense that Newton possessed of the great gap between belief and unbelief.

What Newton thanked God for, was that he had been delivered from unbelief and its twin sin, blasphemy. He showed this plainly in one of his hymns, Hymn 37 in the Third book of the Olney Hymns, "Begone unbelief, my Saviour is near."

One cannot help reflecting here "Is unbelief in our day considered a sin at all?" Besides Thomas à Kempis, Newton read a volume of Beveridge's sermons of which he wrote, "One on the Lord's Passion affected me much." The change then was gradual—by stages—as Newton himself said, "I consider this as the beginning of my return to God—*or rather of His return to me*—but I cannot consider myself to have been a believer, in the full sense of the word, until a considerable time afterwards."

But the change was a permanent one. Newton never went back—and he lived till the year 1807.

After another storm, the ship arrived at length at Lough Swilly for refitting, and in the interval Newton went to Londonderry where he soon recruited his strength. Here he went twice a day to “the prayers at church,” and determined to receive the sacrament. When the day came he rose early, and prepared himself with much earnestness.

Almost at once he underwent another experience which seemed to him an intervention of Providence. He went on a shooting party with the mayor of the city. As he was climbing a bank his fowling-piece went off so near his face as to destroy his hat. His own remark was, “When we, think ourselves in the greatest safety, we are no less exposed to danger than when all the elements seem conspiring to destroy us; the Divine Providence which is sufficient to deliver us in our utmost extremity is equally necessary to our preservation in the most peaceful situation.” Would you subscribe to that statement? It raises a profound theological problem—as most of the statements about Providence do.

Newton wrote elsewhere, “We must not make the experience of others in all respects a rule to ourselves nor our own a rule to others.”

It is useful to think of parallel cases.

The late Archbishop Davidson was, needless to say, a very different kind of personage from John Newton, and it would be ludicrous to suggest any comparison between the two; in their positions and talents.

But the shooting accident which did actually occur to the famous Primate of all England raises the same question of Providence. Newton was probably wrong in laying too much stress on a fowling-piece going off near his head at the wrong time. The same thing has occurred surely to many people. But Newton was entirely right in believing in the Doctrine of a Particular Providence however that doctrine is interpreted. We may take the saying “The very hairs of your head are all numbered” quite literally. Or we may think of the sentence more as a kind of proverb. But whichever way we think of these most precious words of Christ, the truth remains the same, there is such a thing as a particular Providence of God.

Meanwhile, the vessel in which he sailed had not been heard of for eighteen months and had been given up for lost. His father did not expect ever to see his son again—and as we have seen, just missed his son’s arrival before going to York Fort in Hudson Bay. He died two years later from drowning. Newton’s material fortunes now improved.

Between August, 1748 and August, 1754, in which year he quitted the sea, he undertook further voyages to Africa, this time he sailed first as a mate, and then as captain of a slave trader. In view of the fact that thirty-four years later we find him preaching at St. Mary, Woolnoth, about the slave trade, and that he was to become the spiritual adviser of Wilberforce, the story of these further voyages is full of interest.

After only a few months in England, he returned to Sierra Leone to purchase slaves—and visited his former haunts under very different circumstances.

And again we find the intellectual side of this unique man coming to the forefront.

On this voyage he taught himself to be a Latin scholar. Horace is not an easy Latin poet to learn, and the only Latin dictionary he had was an English translation of Castalios’ Latin

Bible. By comparing “the odes” with the interpretation, and tracing words he could understand—he acquired what William Law called “a spice of classical enthusiasm.” By this means he learnt Horace more than some who are masters of the Latin tongue. Again if these details seem to occupy unnecessary proportion in a study of this kind—they have real bearing on the story.

Newton’s heart unconsciously was not in his work—he undertook it, in order to make a living. At heart he was a student, and lover of literature, and a letter writer, and a composer of hymns and a minister of Christ. Unconsciously he was being prepared for his real vocation. In days when children at school acquire their knowledge of the Latin tongue at great expense on the part of their parents, we may well wonder at the manner in which this young slave trader of 23 learnt Latin in the middle years of the eighteenth century. Surely never has Latin been learnt in such a strange way. During this voyage he gained knowledge also of Antigua, and South Carolina, and finally arrived home in December, 1749.

Before starting off again on his next voyage—this time as commander of *The Duke of Argyle*, a ship of 150 tons—Newton was married to Miss Catlett at St. Margaret’s Church, Chatham, February 12th, 1750.

This fact demands more than a passing mention.

Newton’s life story is a romance in the realm of religion—an outstanding example of the power of the Grace of Jesus Christ, but interwoven with it, is a romance of another kind.

The love of Newton for Mary Catlett constitutes a very real eighteenth-century love story. He first met her she was thirteen years old—and even during all the long years of his sojourn in the far country the influence of this affection never left him.

Later in his career, in 1793, three years after the death of Mrs Newton, he published his “letters to a wife” written on these voyages forty years earlier. Apart from the question of taste displayed in publishing the letters at all—they do reveal the almost incredible influence an unseen human person can exercise in times of separation.

The letters are long and numerous, and take up 170 pages in the fifth volume of Cecil’s original edition of Newton’s works. They are worth reading not only for the sake of human interest, but also for the facts revealed in them about slave trading and slave-carrying ships in the mid eighteenth century. This point will be considered when Newton’s relationship with Wilberforce is discussed. During these voyages he continued his self-imposed course of classical education and this time took a dictionary with him; he added Juvenal to Horace, as well as Livy, Sallust and Caesar. There was plenty of time for this—the first of these voyages lasted fourteen months. But more important than this classical, was his theological education, as he puts it in his own eighteenth-century phraseology: “He was given a fuller view of the Pearl of Great Price, the Treasure hid in the field of Holy Scripture,” and for the sake of this he was willing to part with all his newly acquired riches. “As neither poet nor historian could tell me a word of Jesus I applied myself to those who could; so the classics were restrained to one morning in the week, and at length laid aside.”

The crew he commanded was not large—less than that in a large sized modern trawler—he had the control and care of thirty persons whom he treated with humanity.

He established public Worship and read the liturgy of “the Established Church” twice on the Lord’s Day. The number of slaves on board would be about 200. The incongruity of a service held on the upper deck, and a cargo of slaves packed like animals beneath the planks never seemed to have troubled him, but the question of Newton’s share in—and conscience concerning—the slave trade will be discussed in a later chapter.

The second and third voyages, both in a ship called *The African*, are fully described in *The Narrative* and in “*Letters to a wife*.” Quite unexpectedly in November, 1754, his career on the sea came to an end. He had started to fit out another vessel called “*The Bee*” when one day he was suddenly attacked with a fit. He recovered, but the effects of the seizure did not pass so soon—and two days before the vessel sailed, he decided to sever his connection with the sea for good.

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