

John Newton

Life Verse, Part 8

1 Chronicles 17

His nickname was, “The Great Blasphemer” . . . sometimes called, “The African Blasphemer.”

His birthplace was London, England in 1725.

His father was an unbelieving sea Captain who commanded a prosperous trading ship.

His mother was a godly woman who dedicated her life to training their only son.

Her favorite source of curriculum was from Isaac Watts’ book entitled, “Preservatives from the Sins and Follies of Youth.”

Early in life, her son, John Newton, could quote and sing the hymns of Isaac Watts written especially for Children.

Like the one that sings:

*Why should I join with those in play,
In whom I’ve no delight;*

*Who curse and swear about never pray;
Who call ill names and fight.ⁱ*

Tragedy struck early on however when at the age of 7, John Newton’s mother died. And everything changed.

When his father returned from his voyage, he remarried and found that his new wife didn’t care for his young boy. So he was shipped off to boarding school where a brutal headmaster made life absolutely miserable.

His father finally intervened and brought John on board his ship at the age of 11. After several voyages and the ungodly influence surrounding his impressionable spirit, his mother’s lessons were soon forgotten and by the time John turned 16, his profanity and wicked spirit equaled the sailors around him.

He would write of those days – I often saw the necessity of religion as a means of escaping hell; but I loved sin, and was unwilling to forsake it.ⁱⁱ

When he was 17, his father decided to that he should sail to the West Indies and become involved in managing a Jamaican plantation owned by one of his friends. It was a plantation run by African slaves and his father figured that over the next 5 years, John would make a small fortune managing the plantation.

But a week before he was to set sail, close friends of his deceased mother invited him to visit them.

When he arrived, he immediately found a second home and a family – and the affection of a mother he barely remembered as a child.

Their oldest daughter, Mary, was nearly 14 and he literally fell head over heels with her. He would write that she was kind and sweet and fun. She probably never knew his true feelings because he was struck dumb whenever she entered the room.

John so enjoyed his time with her and her family that he never mentioned needing to leave to board his ship for Jamaica. In fact, he purposefully missed the deadline so that the ship sailed away without him.

His father was furious of course, and determined that he set sail on another ship – this one bound for Italy.

During that voyage, for the first time without his father, surrounded by an incredibly pagan environment, he only deepened in his hatred for God.

At the same time, all he could think about was Mary.

Even though John hated religion and wanted nothing to do with God, the Lord obviously protected John from so many sins of the flesh. In fact, one biographer wrote that as the ship pulled into various ports and prostitutes were smuggled on board for the crew, John would climb the mast and hide out in the crow’s nest high above.

When he returned to London after that year-long voyage, his father had planned another job on yet another trading vessel. But John had just a few days to go back to Mary’s house and enjoy their hospitality once again and see Mary, of course.

But once again, he purposefully missed the deadline and the ship sailed without him.

Only this time, things didn’t turn out so well – when he returned to London his father again was furious with him. But while he waited for another job, he happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The shipping industry in these early days was primitive, dirty and the treatment of the crew inhumane. But nothing was more inhumane than the Royal Navy – in fact, it was so bad that they could

never supply warships with volunteers. And so the authorities turned a blind eye while gangs went out and captured young men and forced them into Naval service.

They just so happened to capture John Newton.

He found himself working with condemned criminals from England's jails who had been given the choice of hanging or serving on a British war ship; the stench of the common quarters; ill-cooked food; the violence of his desperate companions and the tyranny of the officers were unbearable.

His father found out what had happened and wrote the ship's Captain, who agreed to promote John as an officer.

His conditions immediately improved and he writes that he actually began to enjoy this life at sea – he was as foul mouthed and atheistic as the unbelieving criminals and officers around him – but he still had one goal that never left his mind – he wanted to win the hand of Mary Cartlett.

After a short voyage, John learned that his ship would be sailing to India and the East Indies and that he would be gone for the next five years – he had just one day's leave in which to see her again – to ask her father for her hand in marriage – to tell her of his love. By now she was 15 – and every father in here is thinking – “Sure, that's old enough.” John was 19.

The visit was a disaster for John. Mary's father denied his request – they wanted their daughter marrying a man with better prospects and they actually forbade John from ever visiting again or corresponding with Mary again.

But Mary seemed somewhat undecided. How could he sail away without knowing her answer?

In desperation, he jumped ship and deserted. He had to stay behind and find out how she felt for him.

In a few days, he was captured and returned to his ship in shackles. Two days later, all 350 of the crew were assembled on deck to witness John Newton's court martial and flogging. He was given 96 lashes with a whip – a beating so brutal even one experienced member of the crew fainted.

He was stripped of his rank and humiliated – he knew Mary's parents would never reconsider now. He was shackled below deck and there, filled with rage he began planning a way to murder the Captain and then throw himself overboard – even if it meant suicide.

John would later write, “It was the secret hand of God that restrained me.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Nineteen days later, they encountered the ship of a slave trader heading for the West Indies who needed another crewmember. The Captain gladly handed over John Newton.

On board this ship, John gave full vent to his foul mouth; his insubordinate spirit; his hatred for God – and his love to torment anyone who seemed interested in religion.

A wealthy trader from West Africa happened to be on board and convinced John that the way to make his fortune and win Mary's hand was to follow in his footsteps.

John agreed and they disembarked at this man's plantation on an island just off the coast of West Africa. This man's mistress was an African woman who immediately decided she didn't like John Newton. It wasn't long before John succumbed to fever and was unable to set sail with the merchant on his next voyage. John was left in the care of his partner's mistress who had already decided to let him die.

John wrote in his journal: “I had not a little difficulty to procure a cup of water when burning with fever. My bed was a mat spread upon a board and a piece of wood was my pillow. Sometimes when she was in a good humor, she would send a slave to hand me her plate with whatever food was left on it after she had dined.”^{iv}

For a year he would languish on that island – a slave, he called himself, to the slaves. He hated God all the more . . . he had been abandoned and had no real reason to live.

He would later write that if it had not been for some of the chained slaves on that plantation taking pity on him and secretly giving him food of their own, he would have starved to death.

But then, shock of all shocks – a ship put anchor near his island after seeing some smoke, and some men came ashore asking the locals – “Have you heard of a white man named John Newton?” They had been sent by John's father.

That was in 1747 . . . John was not quite 21. And God was about to close in on the Great Blasphemer.^v

It would take a year of business before this ship – called the Greyhound – sailed back to England.

I need to let you know that in route it encountered a storm so violent that it began to sink. John was assigned to the pumps and worked them from three in the morning until noon, slept for an hour, then took the helm and steered the ship till midnight.^{vi}

Men and provision had been swept into the sea. The rigging was torn and the hold was full of water; everyone assumed they would die at sea.

Some of the men thought John was like Jonah to them – and they threatened to throw him overboard to see if God would still the storm – but the Captain didn't allow it.

There at that helm, John Newton – for the first time since he was a little boy – began to pray.

He began to evaluate his life . . . his hatred and blasphemy of God . . . he thought of his mother and those early hymns of Isaac Watts.

He wrote, "I decided then and there to attempt to reform my life; to quit swearing, for one, and to think of the Lord's mercy often – and to resolve to do better."

Of course, this wasn't salvation – this was self-reformation; but John began reading a Bible he found, along with Christian literature.

And he would write that he had no Christian friend or Bible believing pastor to talk to about the true gospel and saving faith in Christ alone.

But God was at work.

The ship survived the journey and landed just off Ireland.

John's father had assumed the Greyhound had not survived the storm and that John was dead. But then he received a letter from his son – thanking him for sending people to look for him; informing him of the past few years adventures; John even included in this lengthy letter, about his love for Mary Cartlett and his resolution to be a better man.

His father was thrilled.

In fact, when John arrived back in London he discovered that his father had actually gone to the Cartlett's to speak to Mary's father on John's behalf.

In the meantime, John was given another assignment on a slave trading ship when he was 23 years of age. It was during that voyage – and another life-threatening fever – that John would come to terms with his sin – "My sin – he would write – that put Jesus on the cross – and trust in Christ alone for his forgiveness."

He viewed this as his moment of true and genuine conversion to Jesus Christ.

One of the more than 300 hymns that John Newton would later write, one of them would become his personal testimony of salvation during this moment in his life . . . the lyrics read:

*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 dying 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.*

*Alas! I knew not what I did,
But now my tears are vain,
Where shall my trembling soul be hid?
For I the Lord have slain.
A second look He gave, which said –
I freely all forgive;
This blood is for thy ransom paid,
I did, that thou mayest live^{vii}.*

Less than two years later he was able to propose and Mary Cartlett accepted. By now he was 25 and she was 19.

Almost immediately, John was given the command of a slave ship and soon after marrying his bride, he made two voyages.

As a new Christian, he struggled with the slave trade, and he began keeping a detailed journal. That journal would become the earliest known document recording details of the slave trade –containing minute information about the conditions on board ship, the insurrections and suicides of the slaves.^{viii}

The journal would later be used as evidence by his good friend – a good friend that Newton would meet soon enough – a man by the name of William Wilberforce, with whom John would later encourage and support to see the slave trade end.

In fact, historical accounts seem to imply that John Newton will later lead William Wilberforce to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.^{ix}

You can only imagine the irony of John Newton's profession with his newfound Christianity – keep in mind his profession of slave trading was endorsed by the church, supported by the state and paid for by virtually every public industry.

Can you imagine the irony – and good effort of John Newton – as he attempted to hold Sunday worship services on board his ship.

Little wonder that he began battling even more that growing sense inside him that this occupation was wrong – no matter what the clergy and Parliament and the public said.

A year later he was given command of another slave trading ship called *The African*. That voyage was a disaster; there were numerous insurrections among the slaves – many of them died or committed suicide. A number of his own crew deserted and several others had to be kept in chains; at one point he thought he would die from yet another illness with high fever.

He wrote, “I just want to live . . . and since my former wretched apostasy was known to hundreds, I want to live to show at least as many of them how I have been changed for God’s glory.”^x

He would survive that voyage . . . and still a year later make another voyage in the interests of the slave trade.

By now he was praying that God would give him another calling.

And when Newton was about to embark yet again on another voyage from Liverpool, England, he suddenly, unexpectedly, inexplicably, suffered an epileptic seizure. It hadn’t happened before and it wouldn’t happen again. But his doctor advised him never to sail again.

That was all he needed. He considered it an act of God’s hand and immediately resigned his commission.

John Newton was finished. And he never set sail again.

But now what? He was 29 years old.

He took a job in the field of surveying – and the following year was invited to hear a man preach, by the name of George Whitefield.

Whitefield was preaching nearby, outdoors of course, because no church would allow him to preach indoors – and he was preaching that morning at – get this – 5 am. Four thousand people showed up.^{xi}

Didn’t they know better? Newton was profoundly affected and returned to hear Whitefield again that afternoon. He was able to have a private conversation with Whitefield which began a friendship that would last their lifetimes.

And John began studying – on his own – the doctrines of grace – the teaching of Whitefield and others; he began studying the scriptures and he

began teaching himself the Greek and Hebrew languages.

For the next 10 years he worked as a surveyor and studied the Bible.

Finally, he was ordained and began 40 years of ministry. His first pastorate was in a village named Olney. Three years into his ministry a poet by the name of William Cowper who struggled off and on with depression moved to Olney and joined his church.

Together they began a Thursday evening prayer service and agreed to take turns writing a hymn for each weekly prayer meeting that they would teach the congregation; William Cowper’s most famous hymn would be, *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood, drawn from Emmanuel’s veins*.

During his ministry, the church became so crowded with some 2,000 people that a balcony was added.

Newton and Cowper eventually published a hymnal of all their original hymns.

One of the hymns Newton included was taken from *1 Chronicles 17*. In that chapter, three movements take place:

1. The first is in King David desiring to build a permanent temple for the glory of God.
2. As the chapter progresses, Nathan informs David that he cannot build it, but that God has promised that David’s son, Solomon will be able to build it.
3. The final movement of the chapter takes place with David praising God for his grace – grace in his own life – grace to his own family’s life – and grace to the nation Israel.

The Bible reads at *1 Chronicles 17 and verse 16*. ***Then David the king went in and sat before the Lord and said, “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house that You have brought me this far? 17. This was a small thing in Your eyes, O God; but You have spoken of Your servant’s house for a great while to come, and have regarded me according to the standard of a man of high degree, O Lord God. What more can David still say to You concerning the honor bestowed on Your servant?”*** “

In other words, “Lord – you know the kind of man I am . . . and You know the kind of people we are . . . yet you in Your grace have done amazing things for us all.

When the hymnal was published, the hymn was located right under the heading, “Faith’s Review and Expectation”.

There were 6 stanzas originally – the first three stanzas were faith’s review; the last three stanzas were the expectations of faith:

*Amazing grace how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

*’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved,
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed.*

*Through many dangers, oils, and snares
I have already come;
Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.*

*Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God who called me here below,
Will be forever mine.*

Eventually, John Newton was called to another church in London where he served more than 20 years.

One December, Newton received a note from a 26 year old Member of Parliament asking for an opportunity to have “some serious conversation, but it must be in secret.”^{xii}

The note was from William Wilberforce. He was struggling with a lack of connection with God – he’d only recently begun reading the Bible for himself. Newton witnessed to Wilberforce and gave him the gospel of grace that only looking to Christ alone would bring salvation.

Wilberforce would later write in his journal, “I called upon old Newton – I was much affected in conversing with him . . . and I have come away looking up to God.”^{xiii}

A friendship was begun – between an old, former slave trader, and a young reformer who would eventually bring the slave trade to an end.

Close to his death at 82 years of age, when he was completely blind and unable to read his text, a friend suggested it was time to give up preaching. He responded – “What? I cannot stop . . . shall the old blasphemer stop while he can still speak.”

In one of his last sermons, he summed up his life by saying, “Two things are clear to me; I am a great sinner and Jesus Christ is a great Savior.”

After he died, the words he had dictated for his tombstone were carved, just as he’d ordered . . . and they read:

*John Newton, Clerk,
Once an infidel and libertine,
A servant of slaves in Africa,
Was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior
Jesus Christ,
Preserved, restored, pardoned,
And appointed to preach the faith
He had long labored to destroy.^{xiv}*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/10/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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i John Dunn, *A Biography of John Newton* (New Creation Teaching Ministry), p. 1

ii Bright Examples: Short Sketches of Christian Life (Dublin Tract Repository, 18--), p. 12

iii Dunn, p. 8

iv Dunn, p. 9

v John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance* (Crossway, 2002), p. 47

vi Ibid, p. 48

vii Bright Examples, p. 24
viii Dunn, p. 16
ix Dunn, p. 29
x Dunn, p. 17
xi Dunn, p. 20
xii Dunn, p. 29
xiii Ibid
xiv Bright Examples, p. 50