

Hard Lessons About Sanctification from John Newton

07/04/2018 BRIANNA MCCLEAN

Sanctification and Sin

John Newton was famously familiar with grace. As a slave-trader turned clergyman, he was a living depiction of his much-beloved hymn, Amazing Grace. However, Newton's experience of grace did not climax at conversion. In a less remembered hymn, I Asked the Lord that I Might Grow, Newton captures the tension which lies at the heart of every Christian life: sanctification and sin.

Accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour demands a whole-hearted and life changing pursuit of righteousness. The Bible commands us to flee from sin and God promises to mould us into the image of Christ. How do these truths coexist alongside the inescapable reality of sin? How do you embrace your identity as a new creation in Christ ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)) when your old creaturely habits ensnare you? These are the questions Newton ~~seeks to answer~~ responds to in I Asked the Lord to Grow. 200 years on, there is beautiful solace to be found in these words. Take heart.

I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith and love and ev'ry grace,
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek more earnestly His face.

'Twas He who taught me thus to pray,
And He, I trust, has answered prayer,
But it has been in such a way
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favoured hour
At once He'd answer my request
And, by His love's constraining pow'r,
Subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart
And let the angry pow'rs of hell
Assault my soul in ev'ry part.

Yea, more with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe,
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Humbled my heart and laid me low.

“Lord, why is this,” I trembling cried;
“Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to death?”
“’Tis in this way,” the Lord replied,
“I answer prayer for grace and faith.”

“These inward trials I employ
From self and pride to set thee free
And break thy schemes of earthly joy
That thou may'st find thy all in Me.”

‘I asked the Lord to grow’ – Why?

To understand sanctification in the way that Newton so clearly does, we need to hold fast to two equally true and yet divergent biblical principles. The first is this: before Christ comes again, we will continue to sin. Our flesh will wage war against us every second of every day. If you need confirmation of this, apart from the evidence in your own life, look at Paul's distress in [Romans 7:14-24](#) or John's pleas in [1 John 3:9](#).

Before Christ comes again, we will continue to sin. Our flesh will wage war against us every second of every day.

The second truth is this: the moment we claim the eternal life purchased for us by Jesus, we are made new. The very Spirit of God dwells within us and transforms our hearts, giving us a new desire and strength to pursue sinlessness. It is only on that final day that this transformation will be complete but until then, we look forward to this completion by striving to see the work of sanctification done now. This is why John Newton prays that he ‘might grow In faith and love and ev'ry grace’, as he expectantly awaits spiritual growth. Newton also acknowledges that his prayer is in answer to a command, ‘Twas He who taught me thus to pray’. Jesus taught us to pray, ‘Your Kingdom come’, and this kingdom will firstly come in our hearts as we become more loyal citizens of it.

‘Drove me to despair’

What can we expect when we pray for sanctification? John Newton hoped for ‘some favoured hour’ in which God would ‘subdue my sins and give me rest’. When I pray to become more like Christ, I imagine and increased hunger for righteousness, hatred for sin and passion for witnessing. These are not wrong desires to bring before the Lord, He is more than able. Yet, often our experiences of Christian life often seem more like Newton’s: ‘He made me feel The hidden evils of my heart. And let the angry pow’rs of hell assault my soul in ev’ry part’.

Our experiences of Christian life often seem more like Newton’s: ‘He made me feel The hidden evils of my heart. And let the angry pow’rs of hell assault my soul in ev’ry part’.

When we pray for sanctification, we should expect trials—which will often bring forth and expose our sin. Yet, even that exposure is part of the process of our sanctification. In God’s mysterious grace, He can use the darkness of our sin to hasten sanctification. Here are four ways he does it:

1. ‘The hidden evils of my heart’

Hatred of sin is evidence of re-birth in Christ. As we grow in sanctification, we struggle more with the ‘thorns in our flesh’ ([2 Corinthians 12:7](#)). This is not because the thorns increase, but because they appear increasingly ugly to us. Sin is not godly but anguish over sin is. When we pray for spiritual growth, God grants us new eyes to see our wickedness. May we, by his grace, use that vision to fight more determinedly against sin.

2. ‘Humbled my heart and laid me low’

Sin reminds us of our complete inadequacy before a holy God. There may be behavioural sins we feel we have ‘conquered’ through sheer will-power. In reality, our heart is still twisted and we have not conquered them at all. Falling back into this sin can be a wake-up call. Sin is stronger than us but our Saviour is infinitely stronger than sin and reigns victorious. Sin reminds us that we are unable to save ourselves.

3. ‘These inward trials’

‘Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance

finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.' – [James 1:2-4](#)

Temptation is a trial. Jesus was tested in the wilderness and did not surrender. So too, when we resist sin we are becoming more like Him who has no sin. When 'these inward trials' come, rejoice and fight mightily, knowing that it is an opportunity for sanctification.

4. 'That thou may'st find thy all in Me'

Sin drives you back to the cross, again and again. For those who rests securely in the family of God, sin is not a condemnation but a reminder of His unfathomable grace. John Newton desired comfortable sanctification but God had other plans. By showing him the 'evils of his heart' and the 'angry powers of hell' the Lord renewed the joy of Newton's salvation. Newton prayed for 'grace and faith' and God answered powerfully by using the depravity of Newton's sin to point him back to Jesus. Grace abounds as we seek forgiveness and faith increases as we marvel at the steadfast love of our God.

Be on your guard but do not despair

The sweet truths of "I Asked the Lord that I Might Grow" are music to the ears of every saved sinner. We should pray for sanctification and God will answer. When that answered prayer comes in the form of struggles with sin, we need not despair. God will expose sin to show the glory of the cross. Our salvation is secure and our sanctification is promised. But, this wonderful assurance must not result in apathy. Let us be very clear, sinning does not sanctify. Sin wages war on our soul and must be fled from at all costs. The truth of Newton's hymn and the Gospel it sings of is this: Jesus is victorious over sin and calls us to be too. In his kindness, he uses our brokenness to remind us of his completeness. He shows us his spotlessness by revealing our blemishes. May this urge us onwards to fight sin and pursue sanctification with all the strength we are granted in Christ's death and resurrection.

CHRISTIANITY TODAY – CHRISTIAN HISTORY

John Newton

Reformed slave trade

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

It is probably the most famous hymn in history:

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.

Though some today wonder if the word wretch is hyperbole or a bit of dramatic license, John Newton, the song's author, clearly did not.

Slave trader

Newton was nurtured by a Christian mother who taught him the Bible at an early age, but he was raised in his father's image after she died of tuberculosis when Newton was 7. At age 11, Newton went on his first of six sea-voyages with the merchant navy captain.

Newton lost his first job, in a merchant's office, because of "unsettled behavior and impatience of restraint"—a pattern that would persist for years. He spent his later teen years at sea before he was press-ganged aboard the H.M.S. *Harwich* in 1744. Newton rebelled against the discipline of the Royal Navy and deserted. He was caught, put in irons, and flogged. He eventually convinced his superiors to discharge him to a slaver ship. Espousing freethinking principles, he remained arrogant and insubordinate, and he lived with moral abandon: "I sinned with a high hand," he later wrote, "and I made it my study to tempt and seduce others."

He took up employment with a slave-trader named Clow, who owned a plantation of lemon trees on an island off of west Africa. But he was treated cruelly by Clow and the slaver's African mistress; soon Newton's clothes turned to rags, and Newton was forced to beg for food to allay his hunger.

The sluggish sailor was transferred to the service of the captain of the *Greyhound*, a Liverpool ship, in 1747, and on its homeward journey, the ship was overtaken by an enormous storm. Newton had been reading Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, and was struck by a line about the "uncertain continuance of life." He also recalled the passage in Proverbs, "Because I have called and ye have refused, ... I also will laugh at your calamity." He converted during the storm, though he admitted later, "I cannot consider myself to have been a believer, in the full sense of the word."

Newton then served as a mate and then as captain of a number of slave ships, hoping as a Christian to restrain the worst excesses of the slave trade, "promoting the life of God in the soul" of both his crew and his African cargo.

Amazing hymnal

After leaving the sea for an office job in 1755, Newton held Bible studies in his Liverpool home. Influenced by both the Wesleys and George Whitefield, he adopted mild Calvinist views and became increasingly disgusted with the slave trade and his role in it. He quit, was ordained into the Anglican ministry, and in 1764 took a parish in Olney in Buckinghamshire.

Three years after Newton arrived, poet William Cowper moved to Olney. Cowper, a skilled poet who experienced bouts of depression, became a lay helper in the small congregation.

In 1769, Newton began a Thursday evening prayer service. For almost every week's service, he wrote a hymn to be sung to a familiar tune. Newton challenged Cowper also to write hymns for these meetings, which he did until falling seriously ill in 1773. Newton later combined 280 of his own hymns with 68 of Cowper's in what was to become the popular Olney Hymns. Among the well-known hymns in it are "Amazing Grace," "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," "O for a Closer Walk with God," and "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood."

In 1787 Newton wrote *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* to help William Wilberforce's campaign to end the practice—"a business at which my heart now shudders," he wrote. Recollection of that chapter in his life never left him, and in his old age, when it was suggested that the increasingly feeble Newton retire, he replied, "I cannot stop. What? Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?"

LEARN RELIGIONS

BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN NEWTON, AUTHOR OF AMAZING GRACE SLAVE TRADER TURNED EVANGELIST

By Mary Fairchild

Updated May 15, 2020

John Newton (1725–1807) began his career as a sailor and slave trader. Eventually, he became an Anglican minister and outspoken abolitionist after a dramatic and pivotal conversion to faith in Jesus Christ. Newton is best known for his widely loved and timeless hymn "Amazing Grace."

Early Life

John Newton was born in Wapping, London, the only child of John and Elizabeth Newton. As a young boy, Newton was nurtured in the Reformed faith by his mother, who read the Bible to him and prayed he would become a minister.

Newton was only seven when his mother died from tuberculosis, putting an end to his spiritual training. Although his father remarried, the boy remained detached in his relationship with both father and stepmother.

From age 11 to 17, Newton accompanied his father, a Navy ship's captain, on his sea voyages. After retiring from the sea, the elder Newton took an office job with the Royal Africa Company. He began making arrangements for his son to go to Jamaica for a lucrative business opportunity as a slave plantation overseer.

Meanwhile, young John had other ambitions. He went to Kent to visit with family friends of his late mother and there met and fell instantly and hopelessly in love with Mary Catlett (1729–1790). The lovestruck teenager delayed so long at the Catletts' sizeable estate in Kent, that he missed his ship to Jamaica, and effectively evaded his father's plans.

Many Dangers, Toils, and Snares

Deciding to discipline his unsettled and impulsive son, Newton's father sent the young man back to sea to work as a common sailor. At 19, Newton was forced to enlist in the British Royal Navy and serve as a crewman aboard the man-of-war ship Harwich.

Newton rebelled against the severe discipline of the Royal Navy. He became desperate to find a way back to his beloved Mary and soon deserted. But he was captured, flogged, chained in irons, and eventually discharged from service. Newton would later describe himself at that time as arrogant, rebellious, and living a recklessly sinful life: "I sinned with a high hand," he wrote, "and I made it my study to tempt and seduce others."

Newton ended up taking a job with a slave trader, a man named Mr. Clow, on an island off the western coast of Africa, near Sierra Leone. He was treated so brutally there that later he would remember the time as the lowest point in his spiritual experience. He recalled himself then as "a wretched-looking man toiling in a plantation of lemon trees in the Island of Plantains." He had no shelter, his clothes deteriorated to rags, and to curb his hunger, he resorted to begging for food.

The Hour I First Believed

After more than a year of living in abusive conditions, in 1747 Newton managed to escape the island. He took work aboard the *Greyhound*, a ship based out of Liverpool. By this time,

Newton had begun to read the Bible again, as well as Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, one of the few books on board the ship.

The following year, as the slave-laden ship was bound for home, it encountered a violent North Atlantic storm. On March 21, 1748, Newton was awakened in the night to find the ship in dire trouble, and one sailor already washed overboard. As Newton pumped and bailed, he became convinced that he would soon meet the Lord. Recalling Bible verses about God's grace towards sinners that he had learned from his mother, Newton whispered his first feeble prayer in years. For the remainder of his life, Newton would remember this day as the anniversary of his conversion—"the hour he first believed."

However, it would take several months before Newton's newfound faith would become firmly established. In his autobiography, *An Authentic Narrative* (1764), Newton wrote of an episode of serious backsliding. Only after falling ill with a violent fever did he return to his senses and surrender wholly to God. Newton claimed that from then on, he experienced a new kind of spiritual freedom and never again went back on his faith.

A Life of Joy and Peace

On February 12, 1750, Newton returned to England and married Mary Catlett. He remained devoted to her for the rest of his years.

Once married, Newton served as captain of two different slave ships during the next five years. Eventually, Newton came to hate slavery, profoundly regretting his involvement in it and fighting fiercely against the institution. Later in life, he passionately supported William Wilberforce in his campaign to end slavery in England, provided evidence to the Privy Council, and authored *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* (1787), a tract promoting abolition.

In 1755, Newton abandoned the maritime trade to take a well-paid government post as "Tide Surveyor" in Liverpool. In his spare time, Newton attended church meetings in London, where he became acquainted with the "Great Awakening" preacher George Whitefield and John Wesley, soon coming under their influence. At home, he studied theology, Greek and Hebrew languages, and adopted moderately Calvinist views.

In 1764, at age 39, Newton was ordained an Anglican minister of the Church of England and took a parish in the small village of Olney in Buckinghamshire. Finding himself in his element, Newton thrived as pastor of the humble parish, preaching, singing, and caring for

the souls of his flock. During his 16 years at Olney, the church grew so crowded that it had to be expanded.

Amazing Grace

In Olney, Newton began writing his own simple, heart-felt hymns, many of which were autobiographical in nature. Often he wrote hymns to complement his sermons or to speak to the specific need of a church member.

William Cowper moved to Olney in 1767 and joined Newton in his hymn writing endeavors. Cowper, an accomplished poet, was brilliant but given to acute bouts of depression. In 1779, he and Newton published the famous *Olney Hymns*, a collection celebrating their friendship and spiritual inspirations. Some of Newton's most notable contributions include "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken," "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," and "Amazing Grace."

In 1779, Newton was invited to become rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, one of the most esteemed parishes in London. All across England and beyond, people flocked to hear him preach, sing his hymns, and receive his spiritual advice. He served the parish in London until his death in 1807.

Blind, But Now I See

Toward the end of his life, Newton developed blindness but continued to preach tirelessly. Well known and dearly loved, he became a father figure to the younger clergymen who sought to learn from his wisdom. When William Wilberforce converted to Christianity in 1785, he turned to Newton for counsel.

John's wife, Mary, passed away from cancer in 1790, leaving him with a profound sense of loss. The couple never had children of their own but had adopted two orphaned nieces from Mary's side of the family. Elizabeth (Betsy) Catlett was adopted in 1774, and later Elizabeth (Eliza) Cunningham in 1783. Eliza died as a child, but Betsy remained close to Newton all his life. She even helped care for him in old age after Newton's sight failed and his health weakened.

On December 21, 1807, Newton died peacefully at age 82. He was buried beside his beloved wife at St. Mary Woolnoth in London.

Grace Will Lead Me Home

One historian described John Newton as a “brash, purposeful, big-hearted man, who knew how much he owed to God, and was willing to make himself vulnerable and allow himself to be embarrassed in the quest to pay back some small part of that debt.”

Captured in the words of “Amazing Grace,” is John Newton’s life story. Still today, nearly 250 years after it was written, his anthem is sung around the world by Christians of multiple denominations.

From his pivotal conversion until the day of his death, Newton never stopped marveling at the amazing grace of God that had changed his life so radically. As his eyesight faltered and his body grew frail, friends encouraged the aging man to slow down and retire. But in reply, he declared, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!”

I ASKED THE LORD THAT I MIGHT GROW

by Vince Wright | March 15, 2020 | 11:59 am

Former slave trader John Newton is best known for his song *Amazing Grace*. If you are interested in his background, read the introduction to [Amazing Grace](#).

He wrote other hymns, including *Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*, *How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds!*, and *I Asked The Lord That I Might Grow*.

1. What message does the song communicate?

This song is a testimony on one of Newton's discoveries, namely, that personal growth occurs through suffering.

Newton prays for increased trust in God, lovingkindness for others, and undeserved favor granted to both believers and unbelievers. He hopes to receive these without struggling. To his surprise and dismay, God tests Newton, forcing him to confront his sin and experience humiliation. Newton cried out to God, wondering why He answered Newton's prayer in this manner.

The last verse contains God's response to Newton. Speaking for God is a very dangerous prospect which ought to handle with care. Old Testament prophets were killed for falsely speaking on God's behalf. With that in mind, Newton speaks accurately about God's intent in answering Newton's prayer. God's goal is to discipline Newton so that he could bear fruit, using trials to accomplish it.

There is zero repetition.

Score: **10/10**

2. How much of the lyrics line up with Scripture?

All of it lines up with Scripture.

This song is public domain.

[Verse 1]

*I asked the Lord that I might grow
in faith and love and ev'ry grace;*

Newton prays for excellent things, to grow in:

- faith ([Luke 17:5](#) and [Colossians 2:6-7](#))
- love ([Philippians 1:9](#), [1 Thessalonians 3:12](#), [2 Thessalonians 1:3](#))
- grace ([2 Peter 3:18](#))

*might more of his salvation know,
and seek more earnestly his face.*

He also prayers for increased intimate knowledge of Jesus ([2 Peter 3:18](#)) and for heightened desire to seek God's face ([Psalm 24:6](#), [Psalm 27:8](#), [Psalm 105:4](#), and [Hosea 5:15](#)).

[Verse 2]

*'Twas he who taught me thus to pray,
and he, I trust, has answered pray'r,
but it has been in such a way
as almost drove me to despair.*

Newton acknowledges that God taught him to pray, perhaps alluding to [Matthew 6:9-13](#) and [Luke 11:2-4](#). Scripture is replete with both examples of answered prayer, but, as Newton will soon discover, does not guarantee a green light response. Rather, He promises to hear us ([1 John 5:14-15](#)).

[Verse 3]

*I hoped that in some favored hour
at once he'd answer my request,
and by his love's constraining pow'r
subdue my sins and give me rest.*

Newton was hoping his prayer for increased faith, love, and grace would come without trials or struggle.

[Verse 4]

*Instead of this he made me feel
the hidden evils of my heart,
and let the angry pow'rs of hell
assault my soul in ev'ry part.*

Rather than completely remove tribulation, God's response to Newton is a resounding "no". Why would God do that? Verse 7 answers this question.

[Verse 5]

*Yea more, with his own hand he seemed
intent to aggravate my woe,
crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
humbled my heart, and laid me low.*

Newton continues to complain about his trials, humiliated and dejected.

[Verse 6]

*"Lord, why is this?" I, trembling, cried;
"Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?"*

*“Tis in this way,” the Lord replied,
“I answer prayer for grace and faith.”*

Newton cries out to the Lord, not understanding God’s intent expressed in Verse 5.

[Verse 7]

*“These inward trials I employ
from self and pride to set thee free,
and break thy schemes of earthly joy
that thou may’st find thy all in me.”*

God’s response to Newton is to discipline him, humbling and pruning him to bear more fruit ([John 15:1-11](#) and [Hebrews 12:4-11](#)).

Score: **10/10**

3. How would an outsider interpret the song?

Despite its archaism style, unbelievers will easily understand this as Newton’s prayer offered to God. The end of Verse 2 will intrigue many to keep listening, especially given the surge of positively answered prayer. Verses 4 and 5 will seem contrary to the loving God that Christians espouse, perhaps causing them to ask the same questions that Newton does in Verse 6. Verse 7 is God’s response, easily comprehensible and may cause those outside the camp of Christ to think differently about why God allows bad things to occur.

Score: **10/10**

4. What does this song glorify?

It glorifies God through its wonderful teaching on growth through endurance.

Score: **10/10**

Closing Comments

John Newton’s *I Asked The Lord That I Might Grow* is a great testimonial teaching on the benefits of suffering: increased faith, love, and grace. Both believers and unbelievers can easily digest this God-glorifying classic.

Though a powerful testimony, this doesn’t seem to be a song that focuses on worshipping God in a corporate setting. Still, I’m sure that creative worship directors could find some use for this archaic tune. Perhaps as an opening song, in the rock and roll style?

Final Score: 10/10