

John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace by Jonathan Aitken, Crossway, Carol Stream, IL (2013) (67 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. Grace Flows Like Water

Grace, like water, always flows downward, to the lowest place, I know no one who embodies this principle better than John Newton, author of perhaps the best-loved hymn of all time. Against all odds. (Page 11)

2. Called an Infidel to Minister the Gospel

He never forgot, nor did he ever deny, the sense of undeservedness that marked all that followed. As he wrote in his diary soon after moving to Olney, “Thou hast given an apostate a name and a place among thy children—called an infidel to the ministry of gospel. I am a poor retch that once wandered naked and barefoot, without a home, without a friend, and now for me who once used to be on the ground, and was treated as a dog by all around me, thou hast prepared a house suitable to the connection thou hast put me into.” (Page 12)

3. Newton among the Heroes of the Bible

Newton faced opposition, sneers, and second-guessing during his lifetime. Some scorned his evangelical enthusiasm, some charged him with worsening rather than helping the travails of his friend William Cowper, and some scoffed at his abolitionist crusade as an attempt to assuage the guilt of the past. Newton did not try to defend himself but pointed to any good in himself as an outworking of God’s grace. In doing so, he stands squarely in the biblical tradition, for its great heroes include a murderer and adulterer (King David), a traitor (the apostle Peter), and a persecutor of Christians (the apostle Paul). Grace always had about it the scent of scandal. (Page 12-13)

4. Newton’s Great Turning Day

During the long voyage to England Newton again behaved appallingly as a troublemaker. Although he had been brought up in the Christian faith his by his devout mother, who died when he was six, Newton had become such an aggressive atheist and blasphemer that even his shipmates were shocked by his oaths. Half way across the Atlantic, out of boredom, he picked up the only available book on board the ship, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas `a Kempis. As he read it he began to worry that its words might be true. So he slammed the book shut and went to sleep until awakened in the middle of a terrifying storm by the cry, “The ship is sinking!”

The ship was badly holed and waterlogged. As it seemed to be going down, Newton, to his own great astonishment, began to pray, “Lord, have mercy on us!” After many hours of extreme peril, the storm subsided, and Newton felt at peace. “About this time,” he said, I began to know that there is a God who answered prayer.” Almost immediately Newton stopped swearing, changed his licentious lifestyle, and started to pray and read the Bible. From that day, March 21, 1748, until his death in 1807 he never let a year go by without recognizing in prayerful thanksgiving what he called his “great turning day” of conversion. (Page 19)

5. Newton Advises Wilberforce to Stay in Politics

Newton’s finest hour as a figure of influence began when William Wilberforce sought his advice in a secret meeting on a cold December evening in 1785. The twenty-four-old MP for Hull was in a state of emotional turmoil, wanting to cut short his promising parliamentary career in order to enter the church. Newton firmly advised his young friend not to withdraw from politics but stay in the House of Commons and serve God as a Christian statesman. This was not the obvious recommendation a senior clergyman might have been expected to give to a talented political candidate for ordination. What would have happened if Newton had agreed with Wilberforce’s views that he should leave public life to follow a religious vocation? The loss to British politics, to parliamentary history, and above all to the cause of abolishing the slave trade would have been devastating. (Page 22)

6. Two Great Objects Slave Trade & Morals

The famous words “God Almighty has placed before me two great objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners (Morals)” were written by Wilberforce in his diary at the end of a long day, October 28, 1787, which he had been spent largely alone in Newton’s company. (Page 23)

7. Newton’s Faith, Humility, Gratitude

For through his long and influential public life, the outstanding features of Newton’s private character were faith, humility, and gratitude. The faith was his certainty of God’s faithfulness. The humility was his genuine sense of a sinner’s unworthiness. The gratitude was the overflowing thankfulness of his heart to God for the “amazing grace” that, in the lines of his immortal hymn, “saved a wretch like me.” (Page 24)

8. The Themes of His Biography

Almost the last words spoken by John Newton conveyed the essence of the spirituality that made him such an effective communicator. “I am a great sinner,” said the dying Newton, “but Christ is a great Savior.” How he used the power behind these words to change not only himself but also the religion, the politics, and the society of the times in which he lived are the themes of this biography. (Page 24)

9. Christmas Carol, Joy to The World

One of Watt’s most popular hymns, likely to have been sung in Wapping’s Gravel Lane Chapel at Christmastime in Newton’s childhood, was:

Joy to the world! The Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepares him room
And heaven and earth sing.

The tune to this Christmas carol, still popular in the twenty-first century, was written by a young composer, George Frederick Handel, who became a naturalized British subject in 1726, the year after Newton was born. When he was at the height of his fame as a London preacher, one of Newton’s extraordinary achievements was to draw crowds to his series of fifty sermons on the words of the recitatives, arias, and choruses of Handel’s Messiah, delivered from the pulpit of St. Mary Woolnoth in 1785, the centenary year of the composer’s birth. (Page 29)

10. Newton Had No Moral Qualms about Slavery

Newton’s lack of moral qualms about the slave trade merely showed that he was a man of his time and that he accepted the prevailing standards and attitudes of mid-eighteenth-century England. It was a harshly materialistic society, in which the interests of commerce drowned the voice of conscience. In any case, these voices were conspicuously silent about the iniquities of the slave trade until many years later. The earliest murmurs of protest came from the Quakers of Pennsylvania. (Page 91)

11. A Serious Call (Thank God Always)

If anyone would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness they would tell you to make it a rule to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you. For it is

certain that whatever seeming calamity befalls you, if you can thank and praise God for it you will turn it into a blessing. “William Law” (Page 98-99)

12. 62 out of 218 Slaves Died before They Could Be Sold at Auction

After a ten-week crossing to Antigua in the West Indies, followed by a four-week voyage up to Charleston in South Carolina, many of the Africans in captivity on the *Brownlow* became weak, so much so that sixty-two of the 218 natives on board died before they could be sold off at auction in the slave market of Charleston. Most of them perished through sickness and fatigue. Three or four were killed when in insurrection on board ship had to be violently suppressed. This was an all too frequent pattern of events in the slave trade. Neither the deaths of the slaves from exhaustion, nor the cruelty to them when they tried to rebel were out of the ordinary. Newton’s feelings toward the Africans on the *Brownlow* were of distaste rather than of sympathy. He later told Polly that he was relieved when what remained of the ship’s human cargo was shipped off to the Charleston slave auction because he felt he had been “shut up with almost as many unclean creatures as Noah was, and in a much smaller ark.” (Page 99)

13. Newton Refused Hedonistic Lifestyle

They could not understand Newton’s refusal to enjoy their hedonistic lifestyle and attributed it to his “melancholy” or depression. (Page 110)

14. Christian Gospel and Human Slavery Are Irreconcilable

The best can be said about Newton’s intentions at this time is that they were in a state of confusion and conflict between his slave-trading and his spiritual conscience. The latter was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and human slavery were irreconcilable. In mitigation of Newton’s position, it may be argued that not one single Christian leader in mid-eighteenth-century England had realized, let alone complained, that slave trading was a spiritual and humanitarian abomination. This, however, is an explanation for Newton’s blindness, not an excuse for it. (Page 112)

15. Newton’s Solemn Resolutions

Newton recorded a number of similarly solemn resolutions. They included: “To begin and end every day with God,” “To peruse the scriptures with a diligence and attention suited to the dignity of the subject,” “To spend the hours of the Sabbath entirely with the Lord,” “To choose of my companions only good people from whom I may derive

some improvement,” “and “To become all things to all men in order that I may save some.” (Page 116)

16. Newton Learns How to Pray & Witness to Others

Clunie taught Newton how to pray aloud in company, how to engage in dialogue with fellow believers, how to study the Bible, and how to give witness or personal testimony explaining that the gift of God’s grace had changed his life. Most importantly, the doctrine of justification by faith was strongly emphasized by Clunie. Newton, on fire with enthusiasm for his new friend’s teachings, accepted this promise of salvation. “Now I begin to understand the security of the covenant of Grace,” wrote Newton, “and to expect to be preserved not by my own power and holiness but by the mighty power and promise of God, through faith in an unchangeable Savior.” (Page 124)

17. Attending Whitefield’s Sunday Sermon

Newton, who had been brought up by his mother to believe that preaching “the word” with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was a very good thing, was delighted when through his Stepney pastor, Samuel Brewer, he was given a letter of introduction to George Whitfield. They had three brief encounters on June 6 and 7, 1755, the longest of them just a five minute conversation. Whitefield, who was in a rush to finish some important letters that had to catch a boat to South Carolina, could not spare more time, but gave Newton a ticket for his Sunday service. Arriving at Moorfields Tabernacle in East London the following morning, Newton found himself in a large congregation of over a thousand people. It was a three hour communion service, at which over twenty hymns were sung. The highlights were Whitfield’s talks between the hymns. “Never before had I such an idea and foretaste of the business of “exhortations, encouragement, composure, elevation, and that assurance of faith that shone in his frame and discourses.” Newton’s verdict of the experience was: “At the end, I went away rejoicing.” (Page 128-129)

18. Christian Leaders Were Blind to the Sin Of Slavery

Perhaps Wesley believed, as Newton did, that divine grace can be so cleaning that it makes a redeemed soul suitable for ministry, no matter how sinful the past has been. But a more likely explanation is that throughout the 1750s and 1760s, church leaders of all denominations were blind to the evils of the slave trade, which they did not consider to be an immoral or inhuman business. The light had yet to dawn in eighteenth-century England, even among Christian leaders. (Page 159)

19. He Was A Teacher Not A Firebrand of Emotion

Determined as he was to communicate message of the gospel, Newton was a teacher of learning, not a firebrand of emotion. In matters of doctrine he was an orthodox centrist. In his social attitude he was a respecter of persons. That respect played an important part in his preference and perseverance for ordination into the Church of England, for he was anxious to keep Polly and his Catlett in-law with him as he followed his vocation. Their social prejudices could only be squared with his spiritual life if he became a minister of the Established Church. (Page 177)

20. I Am Standing in a Very Public Point of View

Newton's humility on the eve of going to Olney is reflected in his letters to Polly, Alexander Clunie, and other correspondents. "I now almost stagger at the prospect before me," he wrote to his wife. "I am to stand in a very public point of view, to take the charge of a large parish, to answer the incessant demands of stated and occasional service, to preach what I ought and to be what I preach." (Page 179)

21. Newton Changed His Style & Attracted Thousands

Liverpool, in early May, he was invited to preach in St George's Church, whose vicar had signed Newton's testimonial for ordination. The news that the city's Tide Surveyor had become a clergyman helped swell the congregation, but the sermon divided it: "Some were pleased but many disgusted. I was too long, too loud, too much extempore," he told Alexander Clunie. Taking the criticism received to heart, Newton altered his style of pulpit oratory with good effect. The following Sunday he not only attracted large crowd but pleased it too. "The Lord was very gracious to me at Liverpool," he reported in his next letter to Clunie. "He enabled me to preach his truth before many thousands, I hope with some measure of faithfulness, I trust with some success, and in general with much greater acceptance than I could have expected." (Page 180)

22. Newton Is Insulted Publicly for the Gospel

Disparagement or worse was again encountered by Newton soon after he arrived in Olney. One of the earliest social calls he made was on a clergyman in the adjacent parish. This cleric certainly did not obey the commandment to "love thy neighbor," for he was extremely rude to his visitor. He treated me with some great contempt and indecency," wrote Newton in his diary, "This is the first time I ever had the honor to be publicly insulted for the gospels sake. Lord, teach me to deserve it." (Page 180)

23. Newton's First Sermon on Psalm 130:1

Newton's first sermon from the pulpit in Olney was on Psalm 130 verse 1: "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord." It was an interesting choice for a text, for this penitential psalm, said to be the favorite of Augustine, Calvin, and Wesley, tells of how to climb out of life's depths with God's help toward "plenteous redemption." It was a climb that Newton had been making himself ever since being in dire peril of going down with his ship in the Atlantic storm of March 21, 1748. There can be little doubt that he illustrated the Scripture he had chosen for his first sermon by sharing some of his personal testimony with the congregation. (Page 181)

24. He Was Most Unstuffy Clergyman & in His Personal Appearance

Newton's parish ministry was one of sermons and servanthood, yet it was also characterized by a certain lightness of touch. He was a most unstuffy clergyman both in his personal appearance and in his pastoral approach. Unlike most eighteenth-century pastors Newton rarely appeared in clerical dress on weekdays, preferring to wear his seaman's jacket. He was casual in his clothing and jocular in his conversation. "A little odd-looking man of the methodistical order and without any clerical habit" was the rather disparaging description of Newton by a neighboring Church of England rector, William Cole of Bletchley. It reflected Newton's unpretentious style. This also manifested itself in his way of speaking, which was both human and humorous, much enlivened by seafaring expressions. On his daily visits to the homes of his parishioners, especially to those with personal difficulties, he was a sensitive and sympathetic listener. "I was their official teacher from the pulpit," he wrote to a friend, "but I taught them chiefly by what I first learned from them in the course of the week by visiting and conversing with them from house to house." (Page 187)

25. Feed the People like Chickens, A Little at a Time

Newton was a clergyman with the common touch. He combined a preaching ministry with a relational ministry. In the pulpit he could be passionate, but he was never condescending or didactic. The warmth of his humanity shown through his teachings. He was not an aloof figure, nor was he a long-winded bore. By the standards of his time, his sixty-minute sermons were of average length. He was critical of two-hour and three-hour preachers, saying in down-to-earth language, "Overlong sermons break in upon family concerns and often call off the thoughts from the sermon to the pudding at home that is in danger of being overboiled." In the same letter he changed the metaphor from the kitchen to the farmyard to observe, "Perhaps it is better to feed our

people like chickens, a little and often, than to cram them like turkeys till they cannot hold one gobble more.” (Page187)

26. Newton Was a Very Effective Children’s Teacher Also

The children’s ministry got off to a flying start when eighty-nine children turned up for the first meeting on January 17, 1765. An additional forty-four came the second meeting. These numbers, which swelled to over two hundred by April, necessitated a move to the chancel of the church. Newton was a most effective communicator to the young. He told them Bible stories, wrote poems for them, made them learn hymns by heart, and preached them sermons on parables, memorably illustrating the story of the prodigal son with graphic descriptions of his own early life. He also distributed literature. (Page 188)

27. Friendship in Good Repair

He enjoyed following the advice of his contemporary, Dr. Samuel Johnson: “Sir, a man should keep his friendship in good repair.” (195)

28. Newton Was a Romantic To His Wife

His correspondence to Polly was full of romantic touches. “I prefer the little vicarage of Olney with you in it to the place of kings without you,” he wrote in one letter. “Your affection and its consequences are continually upon my mind, and I feel you in almost every thought... I am sure my love has suffered no abatement; yea, I am sure it has increased from year to year,” he declared to her in the eighteenth year of their marriage. Five years later he was reinforcing the sentiment: “I am always a little awkward without you, and every room where you are not present looks unfinished. It is not a humble servant who says this but a husband, and he says it not in what is called the honeymoon but in the twenty-third year after marriage. (Page 195)

29. Proud Christians are Oxymoron’s Like Sober Drunkards

Another personal comparison may be found in Newton’s emphasis on Paul’s humility as a cardinal virtue for any minister of religion to emulate. Arguing that a proud Christian is as much an oxymoron as a sober drunkard or a generous miser, Newton held up Paul for having “a humble frame of mind . . . the strength and ornament of every other grace.” (Page 203)

30. Children Learned Hymns as Part of Religious Training

It was Newton's practice to make the children who attended those meetings learn hymns by heart as part of their religious instruction. Suitable hymns were sung in the course of these and other meetings to mark the seasons. (Page 213)

31. *Amazing Grace* Out Sells All Other Songs

John Newton's "Amazing Grace," set out above in its original form, is the most sung, most recorded, and most loved hymn in the world. No other song, spiritual or secular, comes close to it in terms of numbers of recordings (over three thousand in the United States alone), frequency of performances (it is publicly sung at least ten million times a year), international popularity across six continents, or cultural longevity (234 years old and still going strong). Every day it touches hearts across the planet in a huge variety of emotional situations that have ranged from occasions of national mourning to celebrations of personal happiness. Yet among the billions of people who have enjoyed singing or listening to "Amazing Grace" remarkably few have any knowledge of its origins, purpose, consequences, or history. (Page 224)

32. *Amazing Grace* Was Written Late December 1772

"Amazing Grace" was conceived by Newton in late December 1772 as part of the preparations he was making for New Year's Day sermon to his parishioners on January 1, 1773." (Page 224)

33. Newton Used Hymns as a Teaching Aid for Children

At the beginning of his curacy in Olney, Newton used the hymns of other writers such as Isaac Watts, or John and Charles Wesley for this purpose. The first recipients of this biblical teaching through hymns had been the children of the parish. Over two hundred of them came on Thursday morning to a weekly meeting held in the Great House (Lord Dartmouth's unused mansion) on the edge of the village. When Newton realized how effective the singing and learning by heart of hymns could be as a spiritual teaching aid for children, he expanded the practice to adult members of his congregation who attended three other weekly prayer meeting in The Great House. Although the hymn singing there proved popular, it was only occasionally extended into Olney church itself because the eighteenth-century Church of England frowned upon anything other than metrical Psalms (the Psalms of the Bible set to singing meters) being sung within consecrated buildings. (Page 224-225)

34. Cowper & Newton Were Each Composing Hymns

Cowper became Newton's closest friend, intellectual confidant and collaborator in the writing of hymns. Throughout the years 1771 and 1772 they were each composing new hymns for the prayer meetings at the rate of three or four a month. Although the two companions undoubtedly stimulated one another in this creative effort, they were never competitors, for Newton recognized that Cowper's gifts as a writer were infinitely superior to his own. Newton thought of his friend as a poetic genius. By contrast, he saw himself as a simple wordsmith who could hammer out verses that would appeal to the ordinary folk of Olney. (Page 225)

35. Amazing Grace Was Biblically Inspired

The biblical foundations of "Amazing Grace" are easily traced. Its first roots of inspiration came from Newton's sermon text of 1 Chronicles 7:16-17. In the opening verse the lines "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see" had clear links to the gospels. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father says, "For this son of mine was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:24). In John 9:25 a blind man healed by Jesus tells the Pharisees, "I was blind, now I see." Similar echoes of biblical authenticity are found in subsequent verses. The "shield" in the fourth verse is likely to have been inspired by the imagery of Ephesians 6:16—"Take up the shield of faith." In the fifth verse the phrase "within the veil" is taken from Hebrews 6:19. In the original sixth verse the picture of the earth dissolving like snow is drawn from 2 Peter 3:12's description of how "the elements melt in the heat." As these references show, there can be no doubt that "Amazing Grace" was a biblically inspired hymn by a writer striving to be faithful to the scripture.

Newton was also being faithful to his personal testimony. Fifteen first-person pronouns—I, me, my, mine—appear in the original version of the hymn. These pronouns were not indications of an ego trip by Newton. He used them as illustrations of the personal journey of faith and redemption that had been traveled by countless believers in God's grace from the dawn of salvation history to the present time. (Page 228)

36. Newton's Hymns Were for His Congregation's Needs

One other personal dimension may have played its part in the composition of "Amazing Grace." Newton always wrote his hymns with the needs of his congregation in mind. Some-times those needs were general, sometimes they were individual. On January 1, 1773 there was one individual who was desperately in need of understanding the

message that God's grace can save the worst of wretches. This was William Cowper whose depression was spiraling downward in a vortex of madness that led to his attempted suicide a few hours later. (Page 229)

37. *Amazing Grace's* Fourth Verse Added

The second most important innovation was that a completely new final verse of "Amazing Grace" had been added in the Uncle Tom's Cabin version. This new concluding verse, which had nothing to do with Newton, had never before appeared in any publication of "Amazing Grace." However, the four lines begin "When we have been here ten thousand years" had been orally around in Afro-American worship for at least half a century, for they were from a verse in a hymn often sung in Virginia known as "Jerusalem, My Happy Home." This verse was established as the new conclusion of "Amazing Grace" by Edwin Othello Excel (1851-1921), a renowned revivalist and worship leader, described by his biographer as "so full of music that he seems to have swallowed a brass band." In 1910 Excel published a best-selling hymnbook, *Coronation Hymns*, which for the first time printed the new verse after Newton's original first three stanzas. This combination of verses became the accepted twentieth-century form of "Amazing Grace". (Page 235-236)

38. *Amazing Grace* Sang As an Incantation & a Charm in 1960s

In the mid twentieth century, "Amazing Grace" moved from gospel music to popular music. The pioneer of this movement was Mahalia Jackson who recorded "Amazing Grace" for Apollo Records on December 10, 1947. It became a huge hit with the radio listening and gramophone record buying public of that era and later shifted into the political consciousness of Black America. Mahalia Jackson was a friend and supporter of Martin Luther King Jr. She sang "Amazing Grace" at numerous civil rights marches and rallies led by King in the early 1960s. "During those days of turmoil," wrote Jackson, "I sang 'Amazing Grace' as a rune to give magical protection—a charm to ward off danger, an incantation to the angels of heaven to descend . . . I was not sure the magic worked outside of church walls . . . in open air in Mississippi. But I wasn't taking any chances." (Page 236)

39. A Verity of "Amazing Grace" Records Were Made After 1970

From the 1970s onward, a large variety of new "Amazing Grace" recordings were made. One of the most memorable was a haunting version on bagpipes played by the Royal Dragoon Guard. It reached No. 1 in the British pop music charts and climbed to No. 11 in the USA. The plaintive tone of the bagpipes may have helped to create a new

recognition that “Amazing Grace” could be used as a melancholy lament appropriate for sorrowful occasions. (Page 236)

40. Thomas Scott Succeeded Newton as Curate In 1771

Thomas Scott did indeed prove to be “an instrument of usefulness.” In his later career he became a renowned evangelical author, lecturer, and Bible commentator as well as a founder of the British and Foreign Bible Society and of the Church Missionary Society. Scott preached regularly in Olney Church, with such success that he eventually succeeded Newton as curate of Olney in 1781. (Page 240)

41. Newton & Bull Love Each Other As David & Jonathan Did

For all his prolific writings and teachings, Newton was aware of his intellectual limitations, which stemmed from the short and rudimentary nature of his formal education. Ever though he has supplemented his schooldays with many enriching years of self-education, Newton felt inferior to men with academic qualifications. Just as he had been drawn to Cowper by the excellence of his mind, Newton was attracted to William Bull for similar reasons. Bull was academically talented, theologically erudite, and personally jovial. He and Newton found that they had many interests in common, ranging from a love of the gospel to a shared sense of humor and an enjoyment of pipe smoking. By the mid-1770s they had become intimate friends. “I love you; I love your company because I believe the Lord speaks through you to my heart, and therefore I wish to see you as often as I can,” wrote Newton to Bull. Bull later characterized their friendship in equally affectionate terms, writing to Newton, “Sometimes I think nobody loves me, and it makes me very low. But I know you do, and I am sure Jonathan did not love David more than I do you.” (Page 244-245)

42. Newton Jollied His Friend Bull Out Of Depressing Moods

At the heart of the intimate friendship between Newton and Bull lay prayer, Bible reading, and theological discussion. It was also a caring relationship, for Bull could become depressed and melancholic in the depth of winter. Newton was skillful at jollying his friend out of these moods with teases, laughter, and long sessions of convivial pipe smoking. The flavor of these encounters was captured in lines of doggerel written by Newton in anticipation of visiting Bull:

A theosophic pipe with brother B

Beneath the shadow of his favorite tree

And then how happy I! how cheerful he! (Page 245)

43. Newton Involved In National Controversy

Newton's involvement in national controversy began as a result of the American War of Independence in 1775-1776. He was perceived by his critics as being against the war and sympathetic to the American colonists. In reality he was more evenhanded, at least in his private correspondence. At the start of the conflict he wrote to John Thornton saying, "On both sides I see tokens of the Lord's displeasure." (Page 249)

44. Family Life & Health Worries

Newton was so busy during his years at Olney that it must at times have been difficult for him to be attentive husband to Polly. Yet, for all his pressure of work and her problems of ill health, they had an exemplary Christian marriage, rooted in love, prayer, and service to others. Polly was a rock of support to her husband's ministry. As a housewife she provided a steady flow of hospitality for the cavalcade of guests who stayed in, or call at, the vicarage. As a sympathetic listener, her care for distressed individuals, such as the disturbed William Cowper or the bereaved Hannah Wilberforce, showed great kindness and gentleness. Those same qualities in Polly emerged in maternal form when the Newtons in 1774 adopted as their daughter an orphaned niece, Betsy Catlett. They also appeared in filial form when Polly's ailing father, George Catlett, needed so much medical attention that he came to live in the vicarage in 1776 until he died there six months later. Amidst all these comings and goings, John and Polly Newton enjoyed a married life of deep mutual dependency, but it was not without its strains, stresses, and temporary separations. (Page 255)

45. Newton Was an Exceptional & Inspirational Leader

Although his last months at Olney were tainted by unhappy experiences, these predeparture tensions should not be allowed to distract from the overall record of Newton's sixteen years of ministry in the town. By any standard, Newton had been an outstanding curate. He was industrious, imaginative, and inspirational in the leadership of his flock. His most important innovations were the introduction of the children's instruction classes and the various adult prayer meetings in the Great House. They resulted in a trebling of his congregation from about two hundred Sunday worshipers to over six hundred, an expansion that necessitated the building of a new gallery in the church as well as extensive renovations to the vicarage. These meetings, at least in the early and middle years of Newton's incumbency, created a spiritual vitality in Olney that strengthened the faith of many people in the parish. From his pulpit, Newton gave his congregation solid spiritual nourishment, illustrated and simplified by the specially composed Olney Hymns. His sermon notes show that he

was an effective and often an excellent preacher of the Word. He had an evangelistic passion to communicate the Good News. His style could be didactic, but in person Newton was a warm, humorous, and caring pastoral minister. His visits to the homes of his parishioners showed exceptional diligence and were greatly appreciated. In addition to giving spiritual counsel, Newton, thanks to Thornton's finding, was often able to provide practical help to those in need. So, at all levels his ministry was a powerful one, sustained by his private prayers, of which he kept such a meticulous record in his diaries. Anyone reading those diaries is likely to conclude that Newton's secret was prayer. His humble, grateful, confessional, and intercessory prayer life kept him in a close relationship with his Lord and drove every aspect of his private thoughts and public ministry. (Page 269)

46. Newton as a House Preacher to Important People

This was a reference to his growing activity of "house preaching," which meant giving spiritual talks in the house of important people all over London. John Thornton often invited business and financial friends to his home to hear Newton preach the gospel over supper. Hannah Wilberforce filled her house in Greenwich with eager listeners to a series of lectures from Newton on Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. These were just two of some twenty Christian hosts and hostesses who regularly welcomed Newton as an evangelistic house preacher to their friends and neighbors. (Page 276)

47. Two Gifts Often Underestimated in His Life

John Newton had two gifts that are often underestimated in historical assessments of his life and ministry. The first was for family love. The second was for personal friendship. (Page 279)

48. Newton Describes His Adopted Daughter's Death

In August 1785, Newton took Eliza back to Taylor's house in Southampton for a six-week visit of therapeutic ozone and sea bathing. This time, the care was to no avail. A few days after her return to London Eliza fell gravely ill, coughing up large quantities of coagulated phlegm and having much difficulty in breathing.

Newton kept a moving record of Eliza's last days. They left a deep impression on him because of her peaceful serenity as death approached. Despite being in great pain, she repeatedly thanked her nurses and the Newton's servants for all their kindness to her. She listened with smiles and nods to the prayers, passages of Scripture, and hymn verses that her adoptive father read to her. When the doctor, on his final visit, asked her how she was, Eliza replied, "Truly happy; and if this is dying it is a pleasant thing to

die.” She chose the text for her own funeral sermon--“Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord,” then prayed with a friend and a cousin, telling them, “See how comfortable the Lord can make a dying-bed.” Her last moments with Newton were poignantly described by him:

After 5 in the afternoon she desired me to pray with her once more. Surely I than prayed from my heart. When I had finished she said Amen. I said, “My dear child, have I expressed your meaning? She answered, “Oh yes,” and then added, “I am ready to say, Why are his chariot wheels so long in coming? But I hope he will enable me to wait his hour with patience.” Those were the last words I heard her speak.

A few minutes later, on the afternoon of October 6, 1785, Eliza Cunningham died, aged fourteen years and eight months. The last two and a half years of her life had brought her into an intensely loving relationship with John Newton, whose care and compassion for his second adopted daughter could not have been greater. At the moment of her death he was walking in the garden of No. 13 Charles Square, saying more prayers for her. On being told, “She is gone,” he went back into Eliza’s room with Polly. “We fell on our knees,” said Newton, “and I returned my most unfeigned thanks to our God and Savior for his abundant goodness to her, crowned in this last instance by giving her so gentle a dismissal.” (Page 281-282)

49. Newton Changed More’s Life

It was Newton’s influence on Hannah More through his writings and sermons in the early 1780s that changed the course of her life toward Christian service and education. (Page 284)

50. Newton Answers Critics about Calvinism

The reality was that Newton was becoming a unique figure in the Established Church. Even among evangelicals he was *sui generis*. His opponents tried to pin all sorts of labels on him, such as Methodist, Puritan, or Calvinist, but Newton could not be so easily pigeonholed. A High Church critic once asked him, “Pray, Mr. Newton, are you a Calvinist?” Newton replied, “Why, sir, I am not found of calling myself by any particular name in religion. But why do you ask me the question?” “Because,” said the High Churchman, “sometimes when I read you and sometimes when I hear you I think you are a Calvinist; and then again I think you are not.” “Why, sir,” responded Newton, “I am more of a Calvinist than anything else, but I use my Calvinism in my writings and my preaching as I use this sugar.” Newton then picked up a lump of sugar, dropped it

into his cup, stirring it, and concluded, “I do not give it alone and whole but mixed and diluted.” (Page 286)

51. The Eclectic Society & *The Messiah*

Christian networking played a large part in Newton’s life as a London evangelical leader. Initially he carried out this activity through personal friendships and hospitality in his own home. But as his importance increased, the mechanism for his networking became more organized. In 1783 he founded a regular discussion group of evangelical leaders and influential laymen, which by the end of that year was called the Eclectic Society. In time it became famous as the inspiration for the Church Missionary Society, the Christian Observer magazine, and other religious associations. The pivotal role played by Newton in the early years of the Eclectic Society confirmed his growing influence in the evangelical world. (Page 289)

52. The Rich Need the Gospel Also: Feed Them Milk Not Meat

As a result of his contacts with the more prosperous section of his parishioners, Newton became convinced that the rich needed to hear the gospel as much as the poor. However, he also recognized that persuading wealthy and successful people to come to church was a difficult challenge. To accommodate this group of bankers and businessmen, Newton began preaching shorter sermons to them, saying that he was imitating St. Paul by becoming “all things to all men” and feeding his influential listeners with “milk” rather than “meat.” (Page 296)

53. Mentor to William Wilberforce

Without William Wilberforce there would have been no successful parliamentary campaign in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century for the abolition of the slave trade. But without John Newton, William Wilberforce would not have been engaged in such a role, for it was Newton who in 1785 persuaded the young MP for Hull not to give up his career in politics in order to enter the church. It was Newton whose experiences as a former slave-ship captain provided Wilberforce with the authentic information he used to such devastating effect in attacking the slave trade. Above all, it was bonding with Newton that gave Wilberforce that powerful combination of political motivation driven by Christian conviction that inspired his abolitionist campaign and enabled him to persevere through many years of defeats and disappointments. (Page 299)

54. Newton's Recommendation to Wilberforce Was His Finest Hour

Persuading Wilberforce to stay on “the right track” and to combine the life of a Christian with the life of a politician was John Newton's finest hour as a pastor. It was not the obvious advice from a senior clergyman meeting a political young future minister of the Church, bursting with spiritual zeal. What would have happened if Newton had recommended to Wilberforce that he should cut himself off from public life and explore what he thought was his call to a religious vocation? The loss to British politics, to parliamentary history, and, above all, to the cause of the abolition of slavery would have been devastating. (Page 304)

55. Newton Advised Wilberforce at Important Moments in Abolition

The welfare of the many slaves in Africa was a constant theme in the correspondence and conversation of Wilberforce and Newton as the abolitionist campaign gathered momentum. Newton's greatest contribution to that campaign was his influence on Wilberforce at important moments. But Newton also became a most effective campaigner in his own right when, from the unique perspective of a former slave-ship captain, he emerged in public as a witness supporting the cause of abolition. (Page 317)

56. Abolitionist Campaigner

Remorse was one of the motives behind Newton's decision to publish *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. “I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating to me that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders,” he wrote in the pamphlet's opening paragraphs, declaring that even if his testimony was unnecessary, “yet perhaps I am bound in conscience to take shame to myself by a public confession.”

Newton's testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause. He himself clearly had this motivation in mind when he prepared the pamphlet, for it was skillfully constructed to have a political as well as a moral and humanitarian appeal. (Page 319)

57. Overturning Misguided Attitudes toward the African People

Newton's assertion that African woman deserve to be respected as much as their European equivalents in matters such as personal modesty and honor was a revolutionary view for its time. But he, William Wilberforce, and other leading figures in the abolitionist movement knew they were in the business of overturning misguided

attitudes toward the African people as well as putting an end to what Newton in the final line of his pamphlet called “a commerce so iniquitous, so cruel, so oppressive, so destructive as the African Slave Trade. (Page 322)

58. Arminian or Calvinist—Must Be Born Again

I repeat my advice to read the Scriptures with prayers, to keep close to the important points, of human depravity, regeneration, the atonement, and the necessity of divine teaching. If a man is born again, hates sin, and depends upon the Savior for life and grace, I care not whether he be an Arminian or a Calvinist. If he be not born again, he is nothing, let him be called by what name he will. (Page 340)

59. The Signs That Accompany Salvation

In 1799, Newton set out his view of “the signs that accompany salvation”:

First a broken and a contrite spirit. This is indispensably necessary, for by nature we all are full of pride, and God resisteth the proud but giveth his grace only to the humble. Second, a simple and upright spirit free from artifice and disguise. It is said of the blessed man, whose sins are forgiven, in his spirit there is no guile. He is open and undisguised. Thirdly, gentle gracious tempers. If a man like a lion takes my medicine he presently becomes a lamb. He is not easily offended. He is very easily reconciled; he indulges no anger; he harbors no resentment; he lives upon forgiveness himself and is therefore ready to forgive if he has aught against any. Fourthly, benevolence, kindness, and an endeavor to please in opposition to that selfishness that is our natural character. Fifthly, a spiritual mind that is the beginning of life and piece, a weanedness from the world and its poor toys, and a thirst for communion with God through Christ. (Page 341-341)

60. Newton Loved His Servants as Family Members

The “house peace” in this trio of blessings flows from the comfortable arrangements Newton had organized at his home, 6 Coleman Street Buildings, where he was looked after by a small team of aged but devoted servants. Unlike most eighteenth-century employers, Newton treated his staff as members of his family. He wrote affectionately to William Bull:

Phoebe is drooping and I think will not hold out long; Cabby is very asthmatic; Sally but so-so. Perhaps one young healthy servant could do as much as all our three; but then we live in love and peace and bear each other’s burdens as much as we can. . . . I

shall always think myself more obliged to them than they can be to me, and I hope nothing but death shall part us. (Page 342)

61. Newton, At Eighty, Refused To Stop Preaching

Despite increasing signs of forgetfulness, Newton, who by the age of eighty was almost blind and partially deaf, insisted that he was still capable of preaching. His friends disagreed. William Bull reported on a dinner he had had with Newton in September 1905. “Mr. Newton is very feeble—had great difficulty to get out of coach. I was obliged to lift him with all my strength,” he wrote, also noting with dismay Newton’s strong opinion that he could still deliver good sermons. “Everybody else shakes his head and laments that he preached at all. . . . His under-standing is in ruins, yet its very ruins are precious,” was Bull’s comment.

A similar view was taken by another close friend, Richard Cecil, who boldly asked Newton in January 1806, “In the article of public preaching might it be best to consider your work done and stop before you evidently discover you can speak no longer?”

“I cannot stop,” replied Newton raising his voice. “What! Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?” (Page 343)

62. Christian Are to Welcome Death, an Invitation to Everlasting Life

What is death to a believer in Jesus! It is simple a ceasing to breathe. If we personify it, we may welcome it as a messenger sent to tell us that the days of our mourning are ended and to open to us the gate of everlasting life. The harbingers of death, sickness, pain and conflict are frequently formidable to the flesh, but death itself is nothing else but a deliverance from then all. (Page 345)

63. Abolition of The Slave Trade March 25, 1807

One immense blessing, which must have delighted Newton when he received and understood it, was the news that Britain’s slave trade had been abolished. After twenty years of parliamentary defeats for his motions, William Wilberforce’s abolition bill was carried by the overwhelming majority of 283 votes to 16 in the House of Commons at 4 a.m. on the morning of February 24, 1807. The bill became law a month later when the Act of Abolition of the Slave Trade received the Royal Assent on March 25. (Page 346)

64. Newton Packed & Ready for Heaven

The satisfaction that Newton must have felt from knowing that the abolitionist cause had finely been won can be compared to the joy of the aged Simeon, a devout worshiper in the temple in Jerusalem at the time of the birth of Christ. “Lord now latest thou thy servant depart in piece” (Luke 2:29), declared Simeon. Newton’s Nunc Dimittis sentiments were more colloquial, demonstrating that on his good days he had not lost his gift for a vivid phraseology. “I am packed and sealed and waiting for the post,” he told one of his visitors. “I am like a person going on a journey on a stagecoach,” He said to another, “who expects its arrival every hour and is frequently looking out of the window for it.” (Page 347)

65. William Jay’s Memory of Newton’s Last Days

The most memorable of these valedictory lines was recorded by William Jay:

I Saw Mr. Newton near the closing scene. He was hardly able to talk; and all I find I had noted down upon my leaving him was this: “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior.” (Page 347)

66. Newton Died December 21, 1807 Age 82 & 5 Months

About 8:15 on the evening of Monday, December 21, 1807, John Newton passed away at the age of eighty-two years and five months. (Page 347)

67. Newton’s Prayer Life Revealed for Study

The secret of Newton’s relationship with God was his prayer life. Because he kept such meticulous diary records it is possible to study in detail how often Newton prayed (at least five hours a day), who he prayed for (a vast list), and what his prayer priorities were (gratitude to the Lord and humility). The theology of his prayer life—giving glory to the sovereign God, struggling to obey and suffer with the crucified Christ, and confiding in his Heaven Father with the heartfelt penitence of a sinner—combined to create a holy relationship between the giver and the hearer of prayer. Anyone who studies Newton’s prayer life will surely learn many lessons from it, for he was a master of devotional disciplines and practices that can open the door to a deep relationship with God. (Page 354)