

Grace Boundless as the Sea

Bastian Fähnrich, 24 June 2018

OIEF, St. Luke's Chapel, Oulu

1) Welcome & Opening Prayer

Welcome to gather together for this worship meeting. Let us devote ourselves to the Lord, especially today, the day of rest and God's Word. Before we start our devotion, let us pray together a prayer reminding us why we are gathered here on this Sunday:

*"Your promise, Lord, and your command
Have brought us here today;
And now, we humbly waiting stand
To hear what you will say.
Meet us, we pray, with words of peace,
And fill our hearts with love;
That from our follies we may cease,
And henceforth faithful prove."*

(John Newton, Olney Hymns, Book 3, [Hymn 91](#))

2) Song

- We have come into His House (MP 729)

3) Devotion

Perhaps some of us have realised this: Today we prayed an opening prayer that was originally written as a hymn by John Newton (1725 – 1807), the famous pastor and writer of *"Amazing Grace"*. Newton used this prayer hymn when he was working as a pastor and gathering with his congregation in Olney, England. He sang it together with his fellow believers in the beginning of a service, possibly also later in his life, when he was serving a church in London.

In the past weeks, I have read John Newton's biography *"[From Disgrace to Amazing Grace](#)"* by Jonathan Aitken. It is amazing to learn what Newton experienced during his life and how he led his life before and after he became a believer in Christ. It took a long time for Newton, however, to become a pastor and hymn writer.

I wish to share a little bit of the life of John Newton, just a glimpse, to be honest. It is only possible to provide a small insight into Newton's life. In the end of this overview, I wish to also let you know what amazes me most about Newton's life and, especially, the way he lived it once he had become a Christian believer. For this devotion I have used resources such as the [book](#) referred to by Jonathan Aitken, as well as [JohnNewton.org](#), [Wikipedia](#) and [Christianity Today](#) and John Newton's [Olney Hymns](#) and other publications.

During Newton's childhood in London, his mother shared the Bible and gospel to him. She prayed that her son may become a pastor one day. Unfortunately, she died already when Newton was aged six. His father was a ship captain and travelled the seas frequently. Newton must have felt being left alone at home, but soon – at the age of eleven – he joined his father and went to sea with him.

At the time when his father retired from seafaring, Newton had made several voyages and decided to sign on with a merchant ship. He experienced the rough life of a sailor, and seemed to forget his early Christian upbringing – life at sea was downgrading his possibility to experience Jesus.

One day Newton was forced into military service by the Royal Navy. This kind of recruitment was quite commonplace in the middle of the 17th century. On his journey, however, Newton wanted to desert. He failed and was disgracefully punished by means of flogging. He even got degraded from the rank of midshipman to a common seaman. Eventually he managed to be transferred to another ship. This ship had goods stored which were traded for slaves in Africa. The slaves were then shipped to the English colonies in the Caribbean and North America. This is nowadays known as the [Triangle Trade](#).

However, Newton did get into trouble with the crew. He had become an angry young man, swearing a lot and rebelling against the rules aboard. Newton was one of the roughest men, and even opposed the Christian faith. Thus the crew left him in Africa in the hands of a slave trader. He was abused and taken captive by the slave trader's wife, an African princess. For some time, Newton even lived a kind of life as a slave, like the people that were captured and enslaved in Africa and shipped overseas like livestock.

In the meantime, Newton's father was searching for him. Eventually a friend of his father, a sea captain, found him in his captivity in Africa. Newton was rescued and went aboard the ship called "Greyhound". This ship was a merchant ship. It sailed in search of gold and ivory along the coast of Africa. Newton travelled as a guest but did not get along with the captain, like many times before in his life. Newton began to drink plenty of alcohol, and continued his bad habits, using foul language and living a rough life. One day he almost

died being drunk but was saved last minute from jumping off board by a fellow sailor.

Last but not least the “Greyhound” crossed the Atlantic Ocean to Brazil, headed to North America, and was then supposed to return to England. In the North Atlantic, however, close to Ireland, the crew encountered a fierce storm. Huge waves crushed against the wooden planks of the ship. Water poured below deck. Newton was asleep as he woke up by the roaring ocean and gushing water. He helped the other seamen to empty the ship from water, but their efforts seemed in vain. Amidst the raging storm and sinking ship, Newton called out to God, *“Lord, have mercy on us.”* He became suddenly aware that he was in need of God. He was commanded on deck to steer the ship, which was still about to sink being tossed around in the stormy sea. Newton had time to think about his life for many hours, asking himself *“What mercy can there be for a wretch like me”*.

Once the storm had calmed, Newton began to understand that God had saved him from death. He probably came across this Bible verse (Psalm 18:16) and acknowledged his rescue: *“God reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters.”* In the following years, Newton changed his bad behaviour for good through the grace of God. He studied the Bible and Christian literature, and even held services on board, as he had become captain of several ships. He was nevertheless engaged in slave-trading and made many journeys from England to Africa and America, and purveyed this business. Like many other Christians at his time, he did not fully acknowledge the sin and evilness of the slave trade or slavery as such.

Yet in the course of his life Newton realised that this practice was wrong and a disgrace towards humanity and God. At some point (1788), he published a book entitled [*“Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade”*](#), in which he wrote: *“I am bound, in conscience, to take shame to myself by a public confession, which, however sincere, comes too late to prevent, or repair, the misery and mischief to which I have, formerly, been accessory. I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was, once, an active instrument, in a business at which my heart now shudders. My headstrong passions and follies plunged me, in early life, into a succession of difficulties and hardships, which, at length, reduced me to seek a refuge among the Natives of Africa. There, for about the space of eighteen months, I was in effect, though without the name, a Captive and a Slave myself; and was depressed to the lowest degree of human wretchedness.”*

Newton’s words are quite remarkable. They came to public knowledge many years after he had retired from his position as a slave ship captain and later as a

tax collector in Liverpool (the main harbour for slave trading in England), and after having served for quite some years as a pastor in Olney and London. Eventually the old Newton and a young politician named William Wilberforce teamed up to oppose the slave trade and slavery. In time their efforts led to the end of the slave trade (1807) and slavery (1833) in the British Empire. Thanks and praise be to God for their lives and works through God's grace!

In the beginning I mentioned that I wish to let you also know what amazes me most about Newton's life and, especially, the way he lived it once he had become a Christian believer.

On the one hand, we can learn from Newton's life that it is possible to be freed from sin by the grace of God, not by our own efforts. Along with Newton we can live through the deep waters of sinfulness, and experience how a sinner can be gradually transformed into a saint. And we can learn from him that living a life as a Christian is so much worth compared to the life of a sinner. The Christian life brings forth much good and many blessings to people's lives.

On the other hand, however, we can see in Newton's life that living a life as a Christian comes along with difficulties and struggles against outward and inner forces. Newton, as well as we as Christian believers, encounter both the heavenly evil powers as well as those of the unbelieving world we are living in, and perhaps even worse: we encounter the old Adam, the old sinful self that is still living within us throughout our life on this earth.

Newton wrote in one of his hymns (Olney Hymns, Book 1, [Hymn 127](#)):

*“Though already saved, by grace,
From the hour we first believed;
Yet while sin and war have place,
We have but a part received:
Still we for salvation wait,
Every hour it nearer comes!”*

Indeed, we have to endure and be content with our part in this life. Each day and hour we must faithfully endure and rest on God's grace until we eventually pass over to eternal life, or meet Jesus upon his return to earth.

As we saw, for Newton it took quite a while before he even got to experience the grace of God and – figuratively speaking – before he reached the haven of the Christian faith from the difficulties and hardships of his life. It took even more years before he fully understood the sin and evilness of the slave trade and slavery. And Newton's faith and his dependence on God's grace alone was

further tested while he spent his life ashore and followed the calling to become a pastor. It took many years before Newton was enabled to serve in a church, as mentioned, first in Olney and then in London.

But God's timing is always perfect. Perhaps God actually made it difficult for Newton to become a pastor, and thus gradually perfected his faith with plenty of humility. This is not to say that Newton could have been perfect in his life, or that we ever could be perfect in this life – on the contrary! But what blessings can we draw from Newton following his conversion and years of ministry! We can clearly see Newton's humble dependence on God's grace in many hymns that he wrote during his life. I wish to present you another hymn (Olney Hymns, Book 1, [Hymn 129](#)), which shows that God's grace is sufficient for us considering our imperfectness and weakness in every respect of our lives as Christian believers. I have shortened it and changed the word order to get to the crux of the matter. It is a hymn about [2 Corinthians 12:9](#):

*What strength have I against unbelief and sin,
Fightings without, and fears within;*

*Alas! I tremble, faint, and fall,
LORD save me, or I give up all.*

*Though weak I'm strong, though troubled blest,
For CHRIST'S own pow'r shall on me rest.*

*My grace would soon exhausted be,
But his is boundless as the sea;*

*Then let me boast with holy Paul,
That I am nothing, CHRIST is all.*

This is really a humble and humbling song. Can you imagine how Newton's congregation became tuned in to an attitude of humility? How much this hymn helped each and every fellowshipper and sinner to acknowledge the ever-present need of God's grace?

Newton further elaborated on "the rule of grace and power of sin" in our lives as Christian believers in yet another hymn, which seems just having being written for a usual Sunday service; with this one (Olney Hymns, Book 1, [Hymn 130](#)) I wish to end this devotion (we will nevertheless sing together the original versions of "Amazing Grace"):

*Strange and mysterious is my life,
What opposites I feel within!
A stable peace, a constant strife,
The rule of grace, the pow'r of sin:
Too often I am captive led,
Yet daily triumph in my Head.*

*I prize the privilege of prayer,
But o! what backwardness to pray!
Though on the LORD I cast my care,
I feel its burden every day:
I seek his will in all I do,
Yet find my own is working too.*

*I call the promises my own,
And prize them more than mines of gold;
Yet though their sweetness I have known,
They leave me unimpressed and cold
One hour upon the truth I feed,
The next I know not what I read.*

*I love the holy day of rest,
When Jesus meets his gathered saints;
Sweet day, of all the week the best!
For its return my spirit pants:
Yet often, through my unbelief,
It proves a day of guilt and grief.*

*While on my Savior I rely,
I know my foes shall loose their aim;
And therefore dare their pow'r defy,
Assured of conquest through his name:
But soon my confidence is slain,
And all my fears return again.*

*Thus different pow'rs within me strive,
And grace, and sin, by turns prevail;
I grieve, rejoice, decline, revive,
And vict'ry hangs in doubtful scale:
But JESUS has his promise passed,
That grace shall overcome at last.
Amen.*

4) Song

- Amazing Grace (MP 31, original version, Olney Hymns, Book 1, [Hymn 41](#))

*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, toils 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 for ever mine.*

5) Closing Prayer

Let's pray to end this worship meeting. You may spend some time in silence, confess your sins and pray and thank for forgiveness silently. After we have prayed, I will close by using the words by John Newton from one of his hymns (Olney Hymns, Book 3, [Hymn 101](#)):

*“May the grace of Christ our Saviour
and the Father’s boundless love,
with the holy Spirit’s favour,
rest upon us from above!
Thus may we abide in union
with each other, and the Lord;
and possess, in sweet communion,
joys which earth cannot afford.”*

Amen.

6) Announcements

7) Farewell & Fellowship Time