

everlasting good; and that **GRACE and STRENGTH** shall be afforded him, according to his day. Thus, his heart being fixed, trusting in the Lord, . . . he is not greatly afraid of evil tidings, but enjoys **A STABLE PEACE** in the midst of a **CHANGING WORLD . . .**

Now, as then, the need is the same, **SALVATION**, in a world seemingly running to destruction, like a ship on the stormy waters of the ocean. Now as then we *can* be rescued, through the **AMAZING GRACE OF GOD**, meted to us totally undeservedly through the **SWEET NAME and PERSON OF JESUS**. In Him is our **PEACE**.

## Stable Peace in a Changing World

### Timely encouragement from the writings of John Newton, 1725~1807

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There is little that we would like more these days than to know that every thing is going to be alright in the end. Time seems to pass by so quickly and things never stay the same from one day to the next. We lose our bearings. Nothing remains unquestioned, not even our faith, and the old moral certainties are evaporating.

Needless to say it has always been the same. It is simply that we notice it more now because of the vast technological advances of recent history. Change is accelerated in consequence so that consistent and rapid adaptation has to be made, as many times in one short life-span now than in three or four generations in earlier days. Small wonder we flounder. Nevertheless we *do* have a bedrock. God in Christ Jesus remains totally in control, and totally dependable in His love for us. We can be anchored in Him and that is the ultimate meaning of saving faith, nothing else but God's grace upholding us through to the end.

Well over two hundred years ago John Newton discovered this for himself. He did not have an easy start to life as a child of a sea-faring father who put his son to sea at the tender age of eleven. Despite the early influence of his profoundly Christian mother, who died when he was only six years old, John quickly abandoned himself to a life of vice, moral laxity and irreligion. But he never totally forgot God who brought him back to Himself through a series of amazing interventions over the years. The one-time slave-trader and blasphemer became the renowned evangelical rector of Olney in Buckinghamshire, England and the author of some of the best loved hymns in his church and beyond. In addition he was one of William Wilberforce's strongest allies in the campaign against slavery.

Here is somebody who knew at first hand about the changes and chances of life, its ups and downs, rapid contrasts, dangers, fears, hopes – just as he knew all the changing moods of the unpredictable sea. God alone was constant and John's salvation was sheer, unmerited grace, and he knew it. Nobody would have been more surprised than John Newton himself at the way one of his hymns took on again only a few years back, not simply among Christians but



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in the pop and football worlds in particular: *AMAZING GRACE* – amazing indeed. That grace which had been so strongly at work in John’s life was still working in full power through his writings:

*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.*

Years after his life-changing conversion, following a miraculous escape of his ship and the crew from a severe gale at sea, John Newton was still marveling at God’s mercy to one like himself – the worst of sinners. Such a totally undeserved blessing began to turn his heart back to God, and quieted his inner turmoil eventually, after a few, perhaps inevitable backslidings. But in all of these he was never to forget totally the One who had intervened so dramatically to stop him in his tracks.

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

Few of us would claim such high drama in our relationship with God, and far better that way. John, like St Paul, was a chosen instrument for our Lord to reveal the depth and power of his redeeming and persevering love. Both men responded absolutely in the end, in keeping with their character, and went on to spend themselves totally in God’s service. In our smaller measure we are called to do the same.

And we too can know that grace once given is never recalled. Though *we* might spurn Him, God remains faithful. Since we have been brought safely to the present moment we can trust for the future:

*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*

*My Prophet, Priest, and King,  
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,  
Accept the praise I bring.*

The contrast between ourselves and our beloved Lord remains immense, however. With Newton we are only too well aware that our puny efforts at prayer and self-offering are totally inadequate – and yet our faith and trust encourage us. One day it will be different and meanwhile we will press on:

*Weak is the effort of my heart,  
And cold my warmest thought;  
But when I see Thee as Thou art,  
I’ll praise Thee as I ought.*

*Till then, I would Thy love proclaim  
With every fleeting breath;  
And may the music of Thy name  
Refresh my soul in death!*

Yes, on we have to go even unto death, but with eyes fixed in faith on what lies beyond.

Although John Newton is best remembered now for hymns such as these we have cited, he also wrote extensively in other forms, letters, autobiography, doctrine and morals and so on. But the underlying message of trust in the unutterable mercy of God, come wind come weather, remains a constant theme throughout his works. Thus we will let John conclude for us and summarise his message for twenty-first century believers like ourselves. His eighteenth century prose is quite formal but his insight and enthusiasm still shine through. Speaking of the person who has been gifted with Christian faith he says:

He worships Him (God in Christ) whom he sees in secret .... By faith he is enabled to use prosperity with moderation .... And his faith upholds him under all trials, by assuring him that every dispensation is under the direction of his Lord .... that the season, measure and continuance of his sufferings, are appointed by infinite wisdom, and designed to work for his

Christian over long years and brought not a few folk to faith in God for the first time, men just as much as women. Such hymns can still be powerful instruments in God's hands if we give them play.

Another longstanding favourite by our author is the little gem, '*How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds*' .... We notice here, in passing, that Newton uses the very same word to describe the name of his Lord as he does when speaking of grace: '*How sweet the name*'; '*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound*' .... Yes, the name of Jesus, like the sacrament of His Body and Blood, does indeed contain all sweetness in itself, the sweetness of His grace.

The name of Jesus is in fact the memory of Jesus, his life-giving presence embodying all His graces. Christians in the Eastern tradition have known this so well and it has been part of our medieval Western inheritance through people like St Bernard of Clairvaux. Thus Newton is at one with Christians of many ages and places when he draws us into contemplation of the holy name. He obviously speaks from the heart of his own personal experience as well:

*How sweet the name of Jesus sounds  
In a believer's ear!  
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,  
And drives away his fear.*

*It makes the wounded spirit whole  
And calms the troubled breast:  
'This manna to the hungry soul,  
And to the weary, rest.*

And we notice Newton's stress on grace again:

*Dear name! the rock on which I build,  
My shield and hiding-place;  
My never-failing treasury, filled  
With boundless stores of grace.*

The biblical imagery abounds and each term and expression can become a meditation in itself as we look for resonances in the Old and New Testaments alike, though perhaps we are even more especially enriched as we apply each image to our own, personal relationship with Jesus:

*Jesus, my Shepherd, Husband, Friend,*

*As long as life endures.*

And it is not only for life down here that we have hope. A Christian's sights are set firmly on heaven, our destiny:

*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.*

Never mind those who mock, claiming it is all pie in the sky and that anyway we are merely concerned with ourselves – '*I shall possess*' ..... Of course, we know that heaven is a corporate place, with 'social joys' beyond our imagining. God Himself is threefold relationship and, incredibly, He invites us to share, in our creaturely measure, something of His own unbounded divine life. But the way there is deeply personal and individual, however much we try, and quite rightly, to help each other along. Each of us in the last analysis has to say his or her own "Yes" to God and nobody can do it for us. There is inevitably, then, a real sense in which we can rejoice in God's *individual* blessings and thank Him for them, in anticipation of their ultimate fulfilment. Surely this is an antidote to our fears and despondency as we journey through an ever-changing world. There *is* unimaginable joy awaiting us, personally, whoever we are and however life treats us:

*There, joys unseen by mortal eyes,  
Or reason's feeble ray,  
In ever-blooming prospects rise  
Unconscious of decay.*

And so, with John Newton, we can, by God's wonderful grace, let faith have full play and anticipate right now what one day will be ours:

*Then now, on faith's sublimest wing,  
Let ardent wishes rise,  
To those bright scenes, where pleasures spring  
Immortal in the skies.*

We make no excuse, then, for private, personal devotion, even at the risk of seeming sentimentality. How some of John Newton's former companions would have jeered at his verses! But his hymnody has sustained many a