



AMAZING GRACE

..... that saved a wretch like me

THE STORY OF JOHN NEWTON By JOE
MUSSER

Drinking, cursing, rebellion, obscene stories and vile living characterized the life of John Newton. His character was despicable and his total personality filthy and rotten, until God met him in grace. He became a mighty man of God and wrote the words of the famous and undying hymn, "Amazing Grace."

ALTHOUGH he was born more than two hundred years ago, John Newton wrote a song which has not only remained a favourite among church groups, but has recently gained new popularity among young people. And it is no surprise to hear it on any secular radio station you happen to tune in to.

What was there about this man's life that enabled him to write a song that still communicates today?

If John Newton's early life could be described in contemporary terms, we'd probably say he was underprivileged. His mother died when he was seven. His

father taught him, but later remarried and brought home a stepmother to help raise John.

When John was eleven, he went to sea with his father who was captain of his own ship. Behind the captain's back, the reckless and sin-loving sailors taught John everything they knew about their kind of life.

By the time he became a teenager, John was already well down the road and could down a tankard of liquor and curse as violently as his shipmates. In fact, his intelligence and creativity inspired some of the most blasphemous and obscene outbursts ever uttered.

It is likely John felt he had to "prove" his manhood by matching every evil thought or action of those who sailed with him. Yet he inwardly knew how wrong he was. In the quaint archaic Old English words of his autobiography (Out of the Depths, Moody Press), he berated himself for the inconsistency in his life.

EXCELLING IN WICKEDNESS

He was taught by his mother to read and practice the Scriptures, but lacked the will-power or courage to reform. He wrote: "I was presently religious in my own eyes (praying and reading the Scriptures) but alas! this seeming goodness had no solid foundation. Instead of prayer, I learned to curse and blaspheme, and was exceedingly wicked when not under my parents' view."

He continued to waver between wanting to do right and falling back into the old patterns. During his early teenage years he experimented with every sinful practice of the day. He could not only keep up with his older companions, he says, but, "I often exceeded their vile wickedness." In fact, John drew great pleasure from luring some other, unsuspecting teen into committing the same sins.

Through these years God was trying to reach John for Himself. He allowed John to have several close brushes with death. His escapes were totally miraculous, and John was forced to acknowledge that it was only of God that he had been spared.

The first episode happened in his first year at sea. While on

leave, John was thrown from a horse and landed within scant inches of a deadly row of stakes, which would have impaled him. He writes, "Had I fallen upon the stakes, I would inevitably have been killed. My conscience suggested to me the dreadful consequences if ... if I had been summoned to appear before God."

So John made feeble reform attempts. Yet it wasn't long before he'd slip back into his old pattern - with worse habits than ever before.

UNWILLING TO FORSAKE SIN

There were other close calls. Once he was delayed in getting back to his ship, and it sailed without him - only for him to find it had capsized. He would have been drowned if he had been on it. At another instance, John's captain pulled him - with no apparent reason - from a crew appointed to explore an island cove. Most of the crew, including the substitute sent in John's place, were killed by savages from the island.

Again and again John's life was spared - and he thought briefly of God's providence. Yet the tug of sin was strong. John says of these escapes, "I was exceedingly affected but I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it."

This pattern helped shape John's character. He had ability, but too often his problems got in the way. At the age of seventeen, he was offered the captaincy of a ship! But after a visit to a tavern and exercise of drunken temper, he lost the position.

As a result, his father made plans for John to take a job in Jamaica - work that would involve a stay of five years overseas. John decided to go and say good-bye to the girl he loved, and stayed with her three weeks. The ship to Jamaica sailed without him, making his father furious. To help straighten out his son," Captain Newton signed his son into the navy on a man-of-war.

On leave following a "shakedown" voyage, preparing the ship and crew for a five-year sea voyage, John decided to visit Mary again. This time he was AWOL for three weeks. In another instance, thought of leaving Mary for five years was too much for him, and he simply fled. However, soldiers came for him, marched him to the city jail and locked him up until

the ship's captain came after him.

As punishment for his absence without leave, John was kept in irons, stripped and flogged, and the crew was forbidden to talk or have anything to do with him. John's bitterness and hatred grew. He plotted how he would kill the captain. The five years at sea under such intolerable conditions made him desperate. He considered how he would somehow get to the captain, kill him - probably with a knife - and then jump to his death in the sea.

Before John could carry out his plan, he learned of another ship in the same port where his own had stopped. He was indentured to the present ship, which meant that he (or his father for him) had sold himself into servitude for five years. In desperation he asked the Captain to transfer him to the other ship. The captain, who was sick of John's troublesome ways, decided it was a good idea. So did the captain of the other ship. And John was elated.

ABOARD SLAVE SHIPS

The captain and crew of this new ship welcomed John. It was at this time John learned the ship was a trading vessel which plied its trade between the Ivory Coast of Africa and North America. Its cargo — slaves!

It was the kind of environment which made John very much at home. There was plenty to drink, loud and obscene stories to tell and hear, and a diversion of a sort unavailable on any other cargo ship. Female slaves were dragged from the hold and abused by the most degenerate sailors while the others watched and cheered.

But after six months, the captain of the ship died. Fearing that he might be transferred or indentured on another man-of-war, John was allowed to transfer to a job with a European slave trader on the African coast. This man's black wife hated John for some reason.

The trader left John in charge of his business while he went on a trip to buy slaves. During his absence, John came down with a violent tropical disease. The man's wife showed no interest in helping John, and, in fact, went out of her way to take out the revenge of her own oppressed people on him. He was nearly dead of hunger and thirst, but somehow clung to

life.

His spirit was finally broken. Forced to crawl on his hands and knees, he would claw the ground for edible roots or stagger along the beach looking for a dead fish washed ashore that he would eat raw.

Sickness and sin had taken their toll on both his mind and body. For almost a year; he was forced to exist in this way.

Finally his health improved, and he was given to a new employer who treated him well. Before long, John's hand in the business led the new employer to share it with John, who was now finally happy.

NEWTON'S CRISIS EXPERIENCE

One day, a ship came into harbour with the news that John was asked to come back to England - not only was "all forgiven," but according to the captain, "A relative of yours has died and left you a fortune!"

John decided to go back. As soon as the ship sailed, the captain admitted the inheritance information was a lie - that he was ordered by John's father to bring the young man back to England, and that was the way he thought would work best.

On the slow journey back to England, John's boredom was relieved as he recalled his old ways of diversion. Before long, he had sunk as low in sin on this ship as ever before, leading the crew in new ways of wickedness.

John Newton, though still a young man, had several lifetimes of sinful experience behind him. His character was despicable and his total personality filthy and rotten. People felt degraded just being with him.

During this voyage, the ship encountered a series of severe storms. Many of the crew were washed overboard. Food and water dwindled or were destroyed. The holds flooded as quickly as the men could bail. Pumps were handled around the clock, but they couldn't keep up.

John along with the others, prepared for the worst. It was utterly hopeless. Once again, John faced the threat of death

and judgment before God.

Suddenly a cry was heard - "We're making headway! The storm's dying down and the water is receding from the hold!" A gleam of hope. However, the storm continued to buffet the ship with tornadic winds and waves sweeping and crashing like liquid avalanches.

John began to pray - not the prayer of a man who is on speaking terms with the Lord, but rather - as he expressed it - "My prayer was like the cry of ravens" - screaming out to God in desperation. The storm subsided. An answer to prayer?

John spent the next few days reflecting - for the first time seriously questioning whether God would ever give him another chance to repent. "I now began to think of that Jesus whom I had so often derided." John writes: "I could not say from my heart that I believed ... yet I would for the present, take it for granted."

The four weeks it took the crippled ship to reach port were agonizing to all aboard. For John Newton, it was doubly so - for his soul was experiencing a crisis if anything more serious than the physical hardship all the men faced.

But they made it !

And when the ship was safely anchored, a new Christian stepped ashore.

John Newton responded to God and the gift of salvation which was offered by his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. From this turning point he began to grow in faith and Christian experience. Soon he was the captain of his own ship (on which he led his men in worship services instead of revelry). and acquired a wife - Mary, the girl he had loved since teenage years.

Looking back, John Newton - self-confessed "wretch" - was able to write several hymns relating to his life and experience and his sensitivity to God's grace and mercy, the most famous of which is "Amazing Grace."

*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.*

*When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun;
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.*

**Dear Reader, we may not be as vile as John Newton was, but
we need the Saviour just as surely as he did!**

All of us!