

Transformed By Grace

**A reflection on the life of John Newton and
on the concept of divine grace.**

by

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Transformed by Grace

John Newton was an 18th century Englishman whose life was radically transformed by God's grace. He was an “*infidel and libertine*”¹ who became a devout Christian and an evangelical priest of the Church of England. He was a dynamic preacher and an empathetic pastor. He was a prolific writer of letters, hymns and journals. Newton fulfilled the roles of mentor and spiritual director to many, either in person or with his extensive correspondence. In this paper, I will tell Newton's story and will consider the questions: *What is divine grace? What does Newton's story reveal to us about grace? How might spiritual directors assist directees to explore and reflect on God's gifts of grace in their lives?*

John Newton (1725 - 1807)

John Newton was born in London on 24 July 1725, the son of a shipmaster. His mother died when Newton was 7 years old and at the age of 11, having received very little formal schooling, he went to sea with his father. In 1744, while on leave, he was 'impressed' into service in the Royal Navy before being exchanged a few years later into service on a slave trading ship. He sailed on several voyages to and from the west coast of Africa, the West Indies, and to North America.

In his early childhood Newton had had some religious instruction from his mother but once beyond the influence of his father and the rules and regulations of the Navy he gave up any religious convictions and lived a free and easy life to please himself. Newton describes himself as being in a similar state as that portrayed in 2 Peter 2: 14.² *“I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt*

1 Newton's epitaph, written by himself. See Appendix 1.

2 2 Peter 2: 14 *“They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children!”*

*and seduce others upon every occasion.”*³

It was probably in 1748 that Newton's life was turned around completely. At sea in the mid-Atlantic, a chance reading of Thomas A Kempis' book, *The Imitation of Christ*, set Newton thinking, “*What if these things should be true?*”⁴ Then, in the midst of a violent storm, his ship was in danger of sinking, and he feared for his life. Lashed to the wheel as he struggled to steer his ship to safety, Newton reflected on his life thus far and concluded that if there was indeed a God, then his own sins were far too great to ever be forgiven. He acknowledged that only the grace of God could save him. When the ship finally made safe harbour Newton said that “*...I began to know that there is a God who hears and answers prayer.*”⁵

Newton could see no reason why God should have wanted to save him. He spent time in prayer and Bible study in an effort to find out more about God. He came across Luke 11:13⁶, and was greatly encouraged. He felt a sense of hope in his difficult circumstances. Several Scripture passages struck a chord for Newton: the parable of the fig tree in Luke 13:6-9; Paul's words about God's mercy in 1Timothy 1:12-17; and, particularly, the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. At this stage Newton had no understanding of the finer points of Christianity or of how to have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. However, he did understand that he had been saved by God's grace and mercy. He repented of his previous misdeeds, resolved to live a better life, and was immediately freed from his deeply rooted habits of

(All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, unless stated otherwise.)

3 Newton, *John Newton, Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God's Grace: His Autobiography*, p 42-43.

4 Ibid, p 69.

5 Ibid, p 79.

6 Luke 11:13 “*If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*”

swearing and profanity.

Newton was at different times exposed to extremes of weather, shipwreck, pirates' attacks, hunger and thirst, bouts of fever, unjust treatment from his employer, and the sometimes brutish behaviour of his shipmates. There were times when he felt so wretched and depressed that he would lapse into some of his previous ways. However, he was always drawn back to his new habits of daily prayer and Bible study.

The love of Newton's life was Mary Catlett. She was only in her early teens when Newton met her and he had to wait seven years before they could marry, in 1750. His love for her had been an anchor point for him through all his difficulties, and a stabilising influence in his life. When at sea, Newton wrote regularly to Mary about a variety of topics. He found that this helped him to think things through and gave him the confidence to articulate his thoughts and opinions.⁷ Once Newton commanded his own ship he had more time to spend in prayer. He conducted services of worship each Sunday, and ensured that both crew and slaves were humanely treated. At that time many people regarded slave trading as a legitimate, even respectable, occupation, but Newton was becoming increasingly restless and dissatisfied with being a “*jailer*”⁸. He prayed that God would place him in a more humane calling where he would be able to fellowship with other believers and would not have such long separations from home. In 1755, just as he was about to set sail on another voyage, Newton suffered a seizure and was unable to go to sea again. He gained a position in the Customs Office as surveyor of the tides in Liverpool. This allowed him more time to continue educating himself with further Bible study, and by learning Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He came to know, and was strongly influenced by, evangelical preachers such as John Wesley and

7 Newton, p 100

8 Ibid, p 115

George Whitefield.⁹

Inspired by the example of the Apostle Paul, Newton felt called to serve others by becoming a priest.¹⁰ Initially he was refused ordination because he had no formal academic qualification. Newton persisted in his self-education, was eventually ordained by the Bishop of Lincoln in 1764, and was appointed to the parish of Olney.¹¹ Newton's preaching became so dynamic that his church had to be enlarged, to accommodate the numbers who came to hear him. He was a prolific hymn writer¹² and, together with his friend William Cowper the poet, aimed to write a new hymn every week for the weekly prayer meeting. In 1779 Newton and Cowper produced *Olney Hymns*.¹³ *Amazing Grace*¹⁴ is probably the best known and most popular of Newton's hymns. From his sermon notes,¹⁵ it seems that Newton wrote the hymn in conjunction with a sermon he preached on the text of 1 Chronicles 17:16-17.¹⁶ He was probably reflecting on the amazing grace of God which had not only saved him from death, but had transformed his thinking, his attitudes, and his lifestyle.

In 1780 John Newton was appointed rector of St Mary Woolnoth in London, the position he held until his death. Bradley refers to Newton as “...one of the most effective Evangelical preachers in London...”.¹⁷ He influenced a number of those who,

9 John Wesley, founder of Methodism, and George Whitefield were itinerant preachers who inspired thousands to become Christians, and were very influential in the Evangelical Revival in 18th century Britain.

10 Newton, p 124. Galatians 1:23-24 “...they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.” And they glorified God because of me.”

11 In Buckinghamshire.

12 Refer to The Cyber Hymnal for a list of Newton's hymns.

www.cyberhymnal.org/bio/n/e/w/newton_j.htm

13 *Olney Hymns*: the first edition, published in 1779, contained 68 hymns written by Cowper and 280 by Newton. The book was widely used, and several later editions were published.

14 See Appendix 2.

15 *Amazing Grace: The Sermon Notes*, www.johnnewton.org/Group/Group.

16 1 Chronicles 17:16-17 “Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and said, “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?.....”

17 Ian Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness*, p 48.

like William Wilberforce¹⁸, were involved in church and social reforms. Cecil describes Newton as “...being of the most friendly and communicative disposition, his house was open to Christians of all ranks and denominations.he used to entertain, encourage and instruct his friends, especially younger ministers, or candidates for the ministry. Here also the poor, the afflicted, and the tempted found an asylum and a sympathy...”.¹⁹ John Newton died on 21st December 1807, having written his own epitaph and instructed where it was to be placed.²⁰

What is divine grace? What does Newton's story reveal to us about grace?

“The grace of God is that quality of God's nature which is the source of men's undeserved blessings, in particular those blessings which have to do with their salvation from sin.”²¹ In the Old Testament the idea of finding grace or favour in the eyes of God is often mentioned. This grace refers to the mercy, justice, kindness, or compassion of God. New Testament writings point to Jesus Christ as the complete expression of God's grace. Paul, who was himself a man transformed by grace,²² wrote: “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result

18 William Wilberforce was a key figure, as a Christian politician, in the abolition of slavery. He worked to promote evangelical Christianity, particularly amongst the upper classes of English society. The 2006 film *Amazing Grace*, starring Ioan Gruffudd as Wilberforce and Albert Finney as Newton, gives some idea of the connection between the two men.

19 Newton, p 132. This, the final chapter of the book is entitled *Further Account of John Newton's Life, Abridged from the Work of the Rev. R. Cecil*.

20 See Appendix 1.

21 *Black's Bible Dictionary*, p 236.

22 Acts 9:1-9.

of works, so that no one may boast.”²³

John Newton knew that it was God's unconditional love for him, undeserved as it was, that had saved him. He did not consider himself equal with Paul, but he recognised the similarities in their stories. He said:²⁴

*“I am not what I might be,
I am not what I ought to be,
I am not what I wish to be,
I am not what I hope to be,
But I thank God
I am not what I once was,
And, I can say with the great apostle,
By the grace of God
I am what I am.”*

Receiving God's gift of grace is a mysterious inner process of a developing yearning to know God more deeply. Only God's Spirit knows when we are ready to receive a deeper understanding, or an insight into a moment of grace. It was several years after his conversion before Newton began to understand “...*the security of the covenant of grace, 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 Saviour.*”²⁵ Newton saw it as by God's grace that he changed his perceptions about the slave trade and became open to God's call into ministry. He wanted to “*testify the riches of divine grace*”²⁶. Newton's hymn *Amazing Grace* is about the grace that brings spiritual salvation, but it is also about the continuing grace of the Spirit which enabled and empowered him “*to be an instrument of His grace*”²⁷ in his priestly ministry.

Newton believed that in order to grow in the grace of God, his life must be fully focused on building his relationship with God. He spent time each day in prayer

23 Ephesians 2: 4-9.

24 John Newton, exact source unknown.

25 Newton, p 114.

26 Ibid, p 124.

27 Newton, *The Utterance of the Heart*, p 410.

and Bible study. He took the words of Scripture as his yardstick in all that he did. He exemplified the words of his friend and protege, William Wilberforce: “...*there is no shortcut to holiness.....Unless they (some ministers) bring forth 'the fruit of the Spirit' (Galatians 5:22), they can have no sufficient evidence that they have actually received the Spirit of Christ*”²⁸.

Nearly two centuries later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was to write about “*costly grace*”²⁹. This is the grace that requires discipleship; the grace that requires the giving of forgiveness, even when there is no repentance. It is costly because “...*it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.....Costly grace is the Incarnation of God*”³⁰.

From his own writings, and from the accounts of his contemporaries, it seems that Newton was totally dedicated to his Lord, and that his life reflected the love and grace of God. He was able to relate to a wide variety of people, regardless of their gender, church affiliation, or social status. He loved to discuss and debate theological and spiritual issues, but he was also concerned for the practical needs of others, especially of the poor and the marginalised. He took a keen interest in the social issues of his time – such as the abolition of slavery. Newton was a man of his time, who reflected the ethos of the evangelical wing of the Church of England, with its emphasis on bringing souls to salvation.

Paul reminds us that we are all sinners (Rom.3:23),³¹ but he also tells us that in Christ we are a new creation – our very being has been renewed (2 Cor.5:17).³² What

28 Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, p 125. (Galatians 5:22-23 “...*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*)

29 Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. See Chapters 1, “*Costly Grace*”, and Chapter 2, “*The Call to Discipleship*”.

30 Bonhoeffer, p 37

31 Romans 3:23 “...*since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;.*”

32 2 Corinthians 5:17 “*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*”

a paradox! We are still sinners, but yet we can choose to be forgiven and transformed by God's grace. As I reflect on the concept of divine grace and its impact on the life of John Newton, my conclusion is that:

Grace is
undeserved and impelling
mysterious and radical
transformational and infinite
God-given and amazing.

How might spiritual directors assist directees to explore and reflect on God's gifts of grace in their lives?

Newton, particularly in his early days as a Christian, would have valued the ministry of a wise mentor to listen to his doubts and questions, and to guide him into a deeper understanding of his relationship with God. He himself was a spiritual mentor to many – perhaps he could be likened to a modern spiritual director? My sense is that, today, a spiritual director would probably not be so directive in approach as Newton appears to have been, but would focus more on being “*an open channel of grace*”³³. Edwards suggests that “*...the director dominantly functions as someone sensitive to the subtle 'movements of the Spirit' in the unique circumstances of a particular person's life.....The director imposes nothing but seeks to listen for and evoke the unfolding image of God...*”³⁴ Like Newton, the director needs to acknowledge the mystery of God's grace and recognise the outworkings of that grace in her³⁵ own life. “*Spiritual unfolding is a slow, long-term process...*”³⁶ It requires trust, by both director and

33 Edwards, *Spiritual Friend*, p 86.

34 Ibid, p 99.

35 In this paper, simply to avoid confusion over pronouns, I have designated the director as female and the directee as male.

36 Edwards, p 162.

directee, in the role of the Holy Spirit within the spiritual direction relationship. Ideally, the director is “*a conveyor of grace*”,³⁷ or what Rupp refers to as “*a catalyst of goodness*”.³⁸

What does the directee understand about God's saving grace? This could be a starting point for a process of exploration and reflection. The director could encourage the directee to reflect on his life thus far, or perhaps on a particular event or relationship. Have there been times when he has been super-aware of God's grace? How has he sensed God's grace in times of distress or turmoil? Is there a Scripture passage, or any other reading, that has helped him to develop his understanding of grace? How does he experience grace in his life now?

There may be factors preventing the directee from appreciating the impact of God's grace in his life – for example, low self-esteem and negative self-image. Issues such as difficult relationships, family crises, suffering, abuse, loss and grief may have contributed to his views about himself and about God. The influence of his family and/or his church background may have led the directee towards a dysfunctional perception of God and a 'skewed' theology. The directee's image of God will affect the way in which he relates to God, and how he perceives God relating to him.

Relationship implies communication. What does the directee understand about prayer? Rupp says that “*Prayer is one of the key places where the Spirit activates this metamorphosis of our hearts into a quality of love reflective of divinity.*”³⁹ Formulating and articulating his thoughts and ideas within a 'safe' environment may help the directee to come to a fuller understanding of prayer as a loving relationship between himself and God, and to know that “*the essence of prayer is not so much what*

37 Yancy, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, p 155.

38 Rupp, *Prayer*, p 118.

39 Rupp, *Prayer*, p 118.

*we do as what God does in us*⁴⁰. He could be encouraged to broaden his prayer life and perhaps pray in new or different ways. As he comes to communicate more fully with God, he will become more aware of the patterns of divine grace in his life.

The concept of forgiveness is an example of the mysterious way in which God's grace works in us, and in our relationships. Forgiveness is *“a gift that is given and received through God's own giftfulness, grace, and of living out of that in a graceful way.”*⁴¹ The directee may be 'stuck' in the way in which he views forgiveness. He may consider himself too 'unworthy' for God to ever forgive him. He may somehow believe in God's forgiveness but yet be unable to forgive himself. Or, he may be holding on to anger and bitterness towards someone else. How 'costly' would it be for him to extend grace and forgiveness to that person? Are there limits to forgiveness? Forgiveness can be the beginning of a *“journey into healing”*⁴² for both forgiver and forgiven. Perhaps, like Newton, the directee would find it helpful to reflect on the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). This parable emphasises the love and reconciliation that *“points to the centrality of forgiveness in the teaching, life and death of Jesus”*⁴³. The story about Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) demonstrates the power of an encounter with Jesus' unconditional love and forgiveness. What a boost to Zacchaeus' self-image that must have been! The disciple Peter denied Jesus three times (John 18:15-27), yet Jesus forgave him and entrusted him with the task of *“feeding his sheep”* (John 21:15-23). Jesus recognised Peter as the *“rock”* on which his church would be built (Matt.16:18-19). Scripture passages such as these may help the directee to take hold of the concept that: *“Forgiveness gives us the capacity to make a new start....And forgiveness is the grace by which you enable the other person to get up, and get up with*

40 David Benner, quoted in SGM Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme, *Notes for Module 4*, p 3.

41 Andrew Dunn, *Refresh:Forgiveness*, Winter 2003, p 3.

42 Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, p 121.

43 Joanna McGrath, *Guidelines: Outrageous Grace*, p 86.

*dignity, to begin anew....”*⁴⁴

Topics such as self-image, God-image, prayer, and forgiveness are too big to be explored fully in this paper, but they will weave their way throughout any ongoing exploration of ways in which the directee may experience God's grace in his life.⁴⁵ There are also the 'grace-filled' moments which occur in everyday life, often unexpectedly. The sight of a bud bursting into flower, the light of the rainbow after the rainstorm, the laughter of a child at play, the birth of a baby, the serendipitous encounter with a stranger, the reconciliation with a family member, the miraculously-made phone connection from a distant country that allowed a significant conversation with a dying friend in New Zealand – these have all been recounted to me as moments of grace from God. The spiritual director can assist the directee to become more aware of these gifts of grace by encouraging him to 'notice' them. How does he sense God speaking to him? What emotions are evoked in him? What is his response to God? As both director and directee trust in God's process, the Holy Spirit will enable the directee to behold God's amazing and transformational grace at work in his life.

The following prayer⁴⁶ seems fitting for the ministry of spiritual direction. As I pray, I am reminded anew of God's abundant gift of transforming grace. I think that John Newton, the evangelical priest, would also have prayed it fervently.

*Father of all,
we give you thanks and praise,
that when we were still far off
you met us in your Son and brought us home.
Dying and living,
he declared your love,
gave us grace
and opened the gate of glory.
May we who share Christ's body
live his risen life;*

44 Desmond Tutu, *Believe*, p 79.

45 See Appendix 4 for some resources on these topics.

46 A Prayer of Thanksgiving, *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, p 428.

*we who drink his cup
bring life to others;
we whom the Spirit lights
give light to the world.
Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us,
so we and all your children shall be free,
and the whole earth live to praise your name.*

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Epitaph

John Newton “*departed December 21, 1807, and was buried in the vault of his church ten days later, having left the following injunction, in a letter, for the direction of his executors:*”⁴⁷

“I propose writing an epitaph for myself, if it may be put up on a plain marble tablet near the vestry door, to the following purport:

JOHN NEWTON, CLERK,
 Once an infidel and libertine,
 A servant of slaves in Africa,
 Was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour,
JESUS CHRIST,
 Preserved, restored, pardoned,
 and appointed to preach the faith
 He had long laboured to destroy,
 Near sixteen years at Olney, in Bucks,
 And years in this church.
 On February 1, 1750, he married
MARY,
 Daughter of the late George Catlett,
 of Chatham, Kent,
 He resigned her to the Lord who gave her,
 On the 15th day of December, 1790.

And I earnestly desire that no other monument and no inscription but to this purport, may be attempted for me.”

An extract from Newton's will, dated June 13, 1803, reads:

*“I commit my soul to my gracious God and Saviour, who mercifully spared and preserved me, when I was an apostate, a blasphemer, and an infidel, and delivered me from that state of misery on the coast of Africa into which my obstinate wickedness had plunged me; and Who has been pleased to admit me, though most unworthy, to preach His glorious gospel. I rely with humble confidence upon the atonement and mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ, God and Man, which I have often proposed to others, as the only foundation whereupon a sinner can build his hope, trusting that He will guard and guide me through the uncertain remainder of my life, and that He will then admit me into His presence in His heavenly kingdom.”*⁴⁸

⁴⁷ John Newton, *John Newton, Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God's Grace: His Autobiography*, p 150-151. This final chapter of the book is entitled *Further Account of John Newton's Life*, and is abridged from the work of The Rev R. Cecil.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p 152

“Amazing Grace”

John Newton probably wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace* between 1760 and 1770, in Olney. It featured in *Olney Hymns*, but under a different title. These are the six verses that appeared in the 1779 and 1808 editions of that hymnal:⁴⁹

*Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That sav'd 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 reliev'd;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believ'd!*

*Thro' 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 promis'd 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 call'd me here below,
Will be forever mine.*

Modern versions often omit verses 5 and 6, and add:⁵⁰

*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'd first begun.*

The origin of the tune is unknown, but it is usually attributed to an early American folk melody. It has been suggested that it may have originated from the tune of a song sung by slaves.

⁴⁹ www.anointedlinks.com/amazing_grace.html

⁵⁰ www.cyberhymnal.org

Contemporary music can also provide insights into the concept of grace. An example is “*Grace*”, by the Irish rock band U2.⁵¹

Grace

Grace, she takes the blame
She covers the shame
Removes the stain
It could be her name

Grace, it's the name for a girl
It's also a thought that changed the world
And when she walks on the street
You can hear the strings
Grace finds goodness in everything

Grace, she's got the walk
Not on a ramp or on chalk
She's got the time to talk
She travels outside of karma
She travels outside of karma
When she goes to work
You can hear her strings
Grace finds beauty in everything

Grace, she carries a world on her hips
No champagne flute for her lips
No twirls or skips between her fingertips
She carries a pearl in perfect condition

What once was hurt
What once was friction
What left a mark
No longer stings
Because Grace makes beauty
Out of ugly things

Grace makes beauty out of ugly things

*“As U2's awesome song goes, Grace does make beauty out of ugly things. You know, one of the majors that marks Jesus out from other heroes/legends/historical figures is the grace he offers through the life he lived here on earth. It's for everyone! Unlike karma you don't get what you deserve. Jesus offers Life and Peace and Joy to everyone....no matter what the story is. You don't need to be in a church building to experience Grace. God's grace is handed to you where ever you are – even standing here in a queue!”*⁵²

51 *Grace* is the final track on U2's 2000 album *All That You Can't Leave Behind*.
[http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Grace-\(U2-song\)](http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Grace-(U2-song))

52 Source unknown. This comment was on a sheet containing the words of the song, which was handed to my son, as he queued for tickets to a U2 concert in Auckland, a year or two ago.