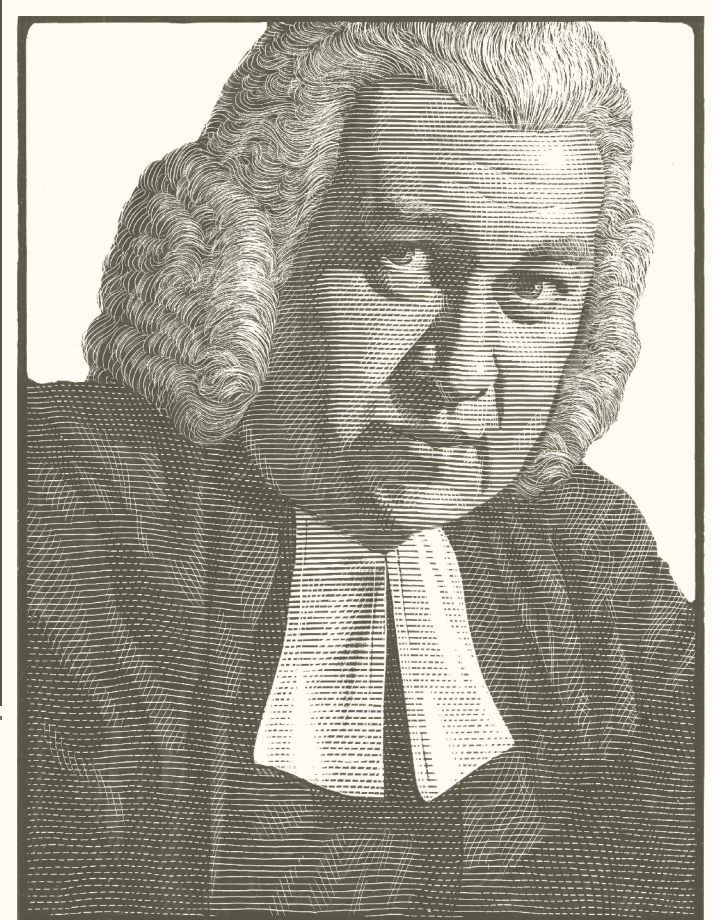


FOREWORD BY JOHN PIPER
TONY REINKE



NEWTON
on the Christian Life

TO LIVE IS CHRIST

“Through Newton’s words and Tony’s words—one voice—God does eye surgery on the heart, so that we see Christ more fully. And *more fully* means seeing him as *more precious*. And *more precious* means *more powerful to heal us and change us*. Relentlessly focused on the sweetness and the greatness of Christ as the Savior and Satisfier of our souls, over this book flies the banner of John Newton: ‘None but Jesus.’”

John Piper, Founder, desiringGod.org; Chancellor, Bethlehem College and Seminary

“Here is mastery! As the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and reigning, was the life-giving focus of the Evangelical Revival, and as George Whitefield was its supreme awakener, and John Wesley its brilliant discipler, so ex–slave trader John Newton was its peerless pastoral counselor and perhaps the greatest Christian letter writer of all time. In his 768-footnote digest of the spiritual wisdom in Newton’s thousand-plus published letters, along with his published sermons and hymns, Reinke distills a vast flow of pure honey for the Christian heart. This is a book to read over and over again.”

J. I. Packer, Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology, Regent College

“Linger long here. The depths and riches within these pages are truly rare and answer what your soul most hungers for: life in Christ. I will be returning to this book many, many times over.”

Ann Voskamp, author, *New York Times* best seller, *One Thousand Gifts*

“*Newton on the Christian Life* is a magnum opus (though Tony still has plenty of time to surpass it)—a bold project, beautifully done. You know *about* John Newton; now you can be pastored by him. You will feel known by him. You will be encouraged that your struggles are like his and his congregants. And you will discover again that huge helpings of the beauty and love of Jesus are the perfect antidote for our self-consumed lives.”

Ed Welch, counselor and faculty member, The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation

“The Christian life is *Christ*, as John Newton clarified so helpfully. If you are still treating Christianity as a strategy for your own self-improvement, this book will not satisfy you. But if you have despaired of yourself and are now clinging only to Christ, this book will refresh you. Newton’s practical counsel, brought vividly to life again by Tony Reinke, will lead you into the green pastures and beside the still waters that are, at this moment, awaiting you in your all-sufficient Savior. For some readers, this book may just become the most important book, outside the Bible, they will ever read.”

Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., Lead Pastor, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“Best known for the iconic hymn ‘Amazing Grace,’ John Newton deserves to be equally known for his tremendous corpus of spiritual letters. In them, Newton’s gifting as a pastoral cardiologist with few peers is on full display. Many of the main struggles and joys of the human heart have not changed. And, as Reinke ably shows, Newton’s advice, given in a world somewhat different from ours, is still potent and relevant. Very highly recommended.”

Michael A. G. Haykin, Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Newton’s pastoral letters are a unique and rich resource for Christians today, and both of us owe them a debt too great to describe. However, they constitute a notoriously difficult body of work in which to navigate. Many a time you can remember some gem you have read in these letters but now can’t locate. Here we have a guide to Newton’s main themes and topics, as well as considered treatments of many of his most valuable letters. This is a welcome tool for Christian growth and discipleship.”

Tim and Kathy Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City

“This book is worth every minute of your time, whether or not you have any interest in John Newton. Reinke brings out Newton in all his cheer to minister to readers. The result is a Christ-exalting manual for growth into Christian joy, freedom, and fruitfulness. No, more than a manual, this is a work of beauty to be read again and again.”

Michael Reeves, Director of Union and Senior Lecturer, Wales Evangelical School of Theology; author, *Delighting in the Trinity*, *The Unquenchable Flame*, and *Rejoicing in Christ*

“John Newton mentored his young friend William Wilberforce into politics, which eventually led to the abolition of the British slave trade. To this day, Newton’s letters continue to disciple generations of Christians. This book draws together Newton’s key life lessons in a way every Christian can apply. As a state governor, a former member of Congress, and a Christian in public service, I am reminded by Newton that we are never more valuable to our society than after we have been humbled by the amazing grace of God.”

Mike Pence

“Reinke takes us well beyond the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ to explore John Newton’s stirring pastoral ministry and soaring vision of the believer’s life in Christ. I am delighted to recommend this book.”

Thomas S. Kidd, Professor of History, Baylor University; author,
The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America

“This book, by one of the brightest writers in contemporary evangelicalism, examines the life lessons of a hymn writer, a freedom fighter, and a gospel preacher. Even if you don’t think you like church history, you will love this book. Reinke ties Newton’s life and thought to practical applications for every believer. I encourage you to read and savor anew the grace that saved wretches like us.”

Russell D. Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission;
author, *Tempted and Tried*

“You may think you are acquainted with John Newton: converted slave trader, pastor, writer of the hymn ‘Amazing Grace.’ Get ready to meet the man you only think you know. Reinke guides us on a tour of Newton’s theology through his life and letters. This book is pastoral theology at its finest. Newton was a man captured by Christ, exalting Christ, and caring for God’s people by pointing them to Christ and him crucified.”

C. J. Mahaney, Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville,
Louisville, Kentucky

“Although John Newton authored what would become America’s best-loved hymn, his contemporaries thought his best gift was letter writing. Rarely, if ever, has so much wisdom, love, sanity, balance, genuine affection, and wonderfully down-to-earth-because-full-of-heaven practical counsel been expressed in letters written in the English language. Underneath them all runs knowledge of the Word of God, a devotion to the Son of God, and a love for the people of God. Newton makes us feel, even two centuries later, that he was writing for us, and that he knew us well. Reinke has done the whole church a service by recovering Newton’s letters from obscurity. *Newton on the Christian Life* is a taste of spiritual manna that will make us want to read the letters of Newton for ourselves.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Professor of Systematic Theology, Redeemer
Seminary, Dallas, Texas

“This book presents valuable lessons from the ministry of John Newton. His perception of grace permeated his theology, his thinking, his experience, his hopes, his ministry, and even his dying. As Reinke writes, grace was ‘the air he breathed.’ Here we catch glimpses into the workings of Newton’s heart as he focused unreservedly on living for and through the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Marylynn Rouse, Director, The John Newton Project

NEWTON

on the Christian Life

THEOLOGIANS ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

EDITED BY STEPHEN J. NICHOLS AND JUSTIN TAYLOR

*Bonhoeffer on the Christian Life:
From the Cross, for the World,*
Stephen J. Nichols

*Calvin on the Christian Life:
Glorifying and Enjoying God Forever,*
Michael Horton

*Edwards on the Christian Life:
Alive to the Beauty of God,*
Dane C. Ortlund

*Luther on the Christian Life:
Cross and Freedom,*
Carl R. Trueman

*Newton on the Christian Life:
To Live Is Christ,*
Tony Reinke

*Packer on the Christian Life:
Knowing God in Christ, Walking by the Spirit,*
Sam Storms

*Schaeffer on the Christian Life:
Countercultural Spirituality,*
William Edgar

*Warfield on the Christian Life:
Living in Light of the Gospel,*
Fred G. Zaspel

*Wesley on the Christian Life:
The Heart Renewed in Love,*
Fred Sanders

NEWTON

on the Christian Life

TO LIVE IS CHRIST

TONY REINKE

FOREWORD BY JOHN PIPER

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Newton on the Christian Life: To Live Is Christ

Copyright © 2015 by Tony S. Reinke

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Josh Dennis

Cover image: Richard Solomon Artists, Mark Summers

First printing 2015

Printed in the United States of America

The author's Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-3971-8

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3974-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3972-5

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3973-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Reinke, Tony, 1977–

Newton on the Christian life: to live is Christ / Tony Reinke;

foreword by John Piper.

pages cm. — (Theologians on the Christian life)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-3971-8 (tp)

1. Newton, John, 1725–1807. 2. Church of England—Clergy—Biography. 3. Hymn writers—England—Biography. I. Title.

BX5199.N55R45 2015

248.4092—dc23

2014038068

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Karalee

I thank the Lord if he makes my writings useful. I hope they contain some of his truths; and truth, like a torch, may be seen by its own light without reference to the hand that holds it.

JOHN NEWTON

CONTENTS

Series Preface	13
Foreword by John Piper	15
Abbreviations	19
Introduction	21
1 Amazing Grace	33
2 Christ All-Sufficient	49
3 The Daily Discipline of Joy in Jesus	67
4 Gospel Simplicity	91
5 Indwelling Sin	107
6 Christ-Centered Holiness	127
7 The Growth Chart of the Christian Life	141
8 Seven Christian Blemishes	161
9 The Discipline of Trials	179
10 The Goal of Bible Reading	205
11 Battling Insecurity	219
12 Victory over Spiritual Weariness	237
13 Victory over Mr. Self	249
14 To Die Is Gain	265
Acknowledgments	271
General Index	273
Scripture Index	281

SERIES PREFACE

Some might call us spoiled. We live in an era of significant and substantial resources for Christians on living the Christian life. We have ready access to books, DVD series, online material, seminars—all in the interest of encouraging us in our daily walk with Christ. The laity, the people in the pew, have access to more information than scholars dreamed of having in previous centuries.

Yet for all our abundance of resources, we also lack something. We tend to lack the perspectives from the past, perspectives from a different time and place than our own. To put the matter differently, we have so many riches in our current horizon that we tend not to look to the horizons of the past.

That is unfortunate, especially when it comes to learning about and practicing discipleship. It's like owning a mansion and choosing to live in only one room. This series invites you to explore the other rooms.

As we go exploring, we will visit places and times different from our own. We will see different models, approaches, and emphases. This series does not intend for these models to be copied uncritically, and it certainly does not intend to put these figures from the past high upon a pedestal like some race of super-Christians. This series intends, however, to help us in the present listen to the past. We believe there is wisdom in the past twenty centuries of the church, wisdom for living the Christian life.

Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor

FOREWORD

One of the most remarkable things about this book is that the voice of Tony Reinke and the voice of John Newton have become almost indistinguishable. This is not because Tony fails to cite Newton or give him credit. Quotations abound. It's because Tony has absorbed the spirit and mind of John Newton. This makes for an uninterrupted immersion into the soul of "the old African blasphemer."

There are few immersions that would be more valuable for your soul. J. I. Packer gives part of the reason: "Ex-slavetrader John Newton was the friendliest, wisest, humblest and least pushy of all the eighteenth-century evangelical leaders, and was perhaps the greatest pastoral letter-writer of all time." Tony has lived in those one thousand letters long enough to be the sweet aroma of this "least-pushy" of eighteenth-century giants.

True humility can take dramatically different forms from one clay pot to another. The form it took in Newton was Christ-exalting tenderness. His own experience of "amazing grace" (he wrote the song) worked its way so deeply into his soul that the log of self-justification was chopped up, and Newton became a delicate surgeon for taking specks out of many sin-sick eyes.

And since, as Tony demonstrates, "Newton is a master craftsman of metaphors for the Christian life," we may listen as he illustrates the way tenderness arises from the experience of grace.

A company of travellers fall into a pit: one of them gets a passenger to draw him out. Now he should not be angry with the rest for falling in; nor because they are not yet out, as he is. He did not pull himself out: instead, therefore, of reproaching them, he should show them pity. . . . A

man, truly illuminated, will no more despise others, than Bartimaeus, after his own eyes were opened, would take a stick, and beat every blind man he met.¹

So Newton is a double master: a master of tender pastoral surgery, and a master of metaphor. As Tony says, “a spiritual doctor” whose specialty is “cardiology,” and whose scalpel and sutures are Bible-saturated, image-laden words.

It is not an inconsistency to say that Newton is “a delicate surgeon for taking specks out of sin-sick eyes,” and to say his specialty is cardiology. In fact, this juxtaposition of eyes and heart points to the essence of Newton’s spiritual method of healing. The heart has eyes (Eph. 1:18). They are made for seeing Christ. But they are blind. Only God can open them. And he uses words.

Through Newton’s words and Tony’s words—one voice—God does eye surgery on the heart, so that we see Christ more fully. And *more fully* means seeing him as *more precious*. And *more precious* means *more powerful to heal us and change us*.

This is how Newton saw the Christian life: “Every step along the path of life is a battle for the Christian to keep two eyes on Christ”—the eyes of the heart. “If I may speak my own experience,” he said, “I find that to keep my eye simply upon Christ, as my *peace*, and my *life*, is by far the hardest part of my calling.”² “I approach the throne of grace encumbered with a thousand distractions of thought, each of which seems to engage more of my attention than the business I have in hand.”³

This is why Newton is such a good eye surgeon for us: he has done the work on himself first. With no formal theological education, he has studied his own soul, his own diseased eyes, until he knows us very well. As the Lord taught him how to see the Savior, he teaches us.

And that is the essence of Christian living. “To know him, is the shortest description of true grace; to know him better, is the surest mark of growth in grace; to know him perfectly, is eternal life.”⁴

The reason most of us “live so far below our privileges, and are so often

¹ W, 1:105. (Direct quotes in this book from the works of Newton have been slightly modified to conform to current American standards of spelling, punctuation, and lowercase divine pronouns. Otherwise all quotes reflect the originals. Unless otherwise indicated, italics in quotations are original to the sources cited.—TR)

² W, 6:44–45.

³ W, 6:179–80.

⁴ W, 6:73–74.

heavy and sorrowful,” is that the eyes of our hearts—the eyes of faith—do not see that “we have in him grounds of continual joy.”⁵ “The greatest happiness we are capable of,” Newton says, is our communion with Christ.⁶ “Hungering and thirsting for Christ is the central daily Christian discipline”—to see him clearly and to depend “on him for hourly supplies of wisdom, strength, and comfort.”⁷

Newton was the tender, “least pushy” of the eighteenth-century giants because this was his experience—a tender, nearby Jesus. “Jesus is always near, about our path by day, and our bed by night; nearer than the light by which we see, or the air we breathe; nearer than we are to ourselves; so that not a thought, a sigh, or a tear, escapes his notice.”⁸

But Newton does not sink into individualistic sentimentalism. Jesus is too great for that.

His treasury of life and salvation is inexhaustible . . . like the sun, which having cheered the successive generations of mankind with his beams, still shines with undiminished luster, is still the fountain of light, and has always a sufficiency to fill innumerable millions of eyes in the same instant.⁹

This is what we long for in our day—a great awakening in which the glory of Christ fills innumerable millions of eyes. Newton was the fruit of one of those awakenings. Perhaps God may be pleased to make him a bridge from that one to the one we need.

If he blesses this book that way, it will be because of Newton’s—and Tony’s—relentless focus on the sweetness and the greatness of Christ as the Savior and Satisfier of our souls. Over this book flies the banner of John Newton: “None but Jesus.” I join Tony in praying that the readers will be many, and the testimony of each will be Newton’s own:

Then let me boast with holy Paul,
That I am nothing, Christ is all.¹⁰

John Piper

⁵ W, 2:578.

⁶ W, 2:213.

⁷ W, 1:33.

⁸ *Letters* (Taylor), 187.

⁹ W, 4:78.

¹⁰ W, 3:450.

ABBREVIATIONS

Aitken	Aitken, Jonathan. <i>John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace</i> . Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007.
Bull, <i>Life</i>	Bull, Josiah. <i>The Life of John Newton</i> . 1868. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2007.
<i>Eclectic</i>	Pratt, Josiah, ed. <i>Eclectic Notes: Or Notes of Discussions on Religious Topics at the Meetings of the Eclectic Society, London, during the Years 1798–1814</i> . London, 1856.
Hindmarsh	Hindmarsh, Bruce. <i>John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce</i> . Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 2001.
Letters (Barlass)	<i>Sermons on Practical Subjects by William Barlass, Minister of the Gospel, with the Correspondence between the Author and the Rev. John Newton</i> . New York, 1818.
Letters (Bull 1847)	Bull, William, ed. <i>One Hundred and Twenty Nine Letters from the Rev. John Newton to Josiah Bull</i> . London, 1847.
Letters (Bull 1869)	Bull, William, ed. <i>Letters of John Newton</i> . Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2007. Previously published as <i>Letters of the Rev. John Newton of Olney and St. Mary Woolnoth, Including Several Never Before Published, by the Rev. Josiah Bull, M.A.</i> London, 1869.
Letters (Campbell)	Campbell, John, ed. <i>Letters and Conversational Remarks, by the Late Rev. John Newton</i> . New York, 1811.
Letters (Clunie)	<i>The Christian Correspondent: Or a Series of Religious Letters Written by the Rev. John Newton to Alexander Clunie</i> . Hull, 1790.
Letters (Coffin)	Coffin, John, ed. <i>Sixty-Six Letters from the Rev. John Newton to a Clergyman and His Family</i> . London, 1844.

- Letters (Dartmouth) *Historical Manuscripts Commission. XV Report, Appendix, Part 1, The Manuscripts of the Earl of Dartmouth.* Vol. 3. London, 1896.
- Letters (Jay) *The Autobiography of the Rev. William Jay.* New York, 1855.
- Letters (Jones) Jones, Robert, ed. *Twenty-Five Letters Hitherto Unpublished, of the Rev. John Newton.* Edinburgh, 1847.
- Letters (More) *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More.* Vol. 3. London, 1835.
- Letters (Palmer) *The Correspondence of the Late Rev. John Newton with a Dissenting Minister [Samuel Palmer] on Various Subjects and Occasions.* N.p., 1809.
- Letters (Ryland) Gordon, Grant, ed. *Wise Counsel: John Newton's Letters to John Ryland, Jr.* Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009.
- Letters (Scott) *The Force of Truth: An Authentic Narrative by Rev. Thomas Scott, to Which Are Added Eight Letters to Dr. Scott by Rev. John Newton.* Philadelphia, 1841.
- Letters (Taylor) *The Aged Pilgrim's Triumph over Sin and the Grave, Illustrated in a Series of Letters [to Walter Taylor et al.], Never Before Published, by the Rev. John Newton.* New York, 1825.
- Letters (Thornton) Rinehart, John, ed. *Letters to a Gospel Patron: John Newton and John Thornton, 1770 to 1786.* Redmond, WA: Reclaimed, forthcoming.
- Letters (Wilberforce) *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce.* Vol. 1. Philadelphia, 1846.
- W, 1–6 Newton, John. *The Works of John Newton.* 6 vols. London, 1824. Reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985.

Other Newton sources, consulted but not cited directly:

Cecil, Richard, and Marylynn Rouse, eds. *John Newton.* Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2000.

The Life and Writings of Mrs. Dawson of Lancaster: With Nine Unpublished Letters from the Rev. John Newton. Kirkby Lonsdale, 1828.

Newton, John. *An Authentic Narrative.* In *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton.* Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 1998.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1758, New England pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards died from smallpox at the age of fifty-five. Three months later, and three thousand nautical miles away, a young man in England sunk to his knees in prayer. The young man was John Newton (1725–1807). Newton began an intense season of prayer, fasting, Bible reading, self-inquiry, and intense deliberation before the Lord concerning his burgeoning desire for pastoral ministry. The forty-two days of self-examination concluded on his thirty-third birthday, August 4, 1758. Newton wrote in his diary, “The day is now arrived when I propose to close all my deliberations on this subject with a solemn, unreserved, unconditional surrender of myself to the Lord.”¹

Ministry was an unlikely career path for the young man born with salt-water in his veins and with nearly two decades of sailing experience on his résumé. Newton’s sailing days began at age eleven when he accompanied his father on the sea, but ended at age twenty-nine when he suffered a surprise epileptic seizure. A year later, in 1754, he became a land-based surveyor of the tides (a senior customs official) in Liverpool, the busiest slave-ship harbor in England, and, as a result, Europe’s richest port.² With the position came significant authority, desirable comforts, and a solid paycheck.

Newton had everything. He was a young Christian, married to the woman of his dreams, shrewd in business, and settled in a secure job. But despite the securities, his heart remained restless for a very improbable calling. On his thirty-third birthday Newton was fully persuaded: the Lord

¹ Aitken, 149.

² William E. Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton: Slave-Ship Captain, Hymnwriter, and Abolitionist* (Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001): “When a famous actor was booed on a Liverpool stage, he responded, ‘I have not come here to be insulted by a set of wretches, every brick in whose infernal town is cemented with an African’s blood’” (28–29).

had called him to pastoral ministry, and to a significant pay cut. The transition ahead was long and painful. Due to ecclesiastical hurdles, it would take six years and the help of the distinguished William Legge, the second earl of Dartmouth, to finally land Newton's first pastorate in 1764.

Newton's fruitful forty-three years as a shepherd, first in the village of Olney (1764–1779), then in the city of London (1779–1806), would not hallow his name in church history. He's mostly remembered for his hymn "Amazing Grace," for his radical spiritual transformation from a near-death shipwreck, and for his work with William Wilberforce (1759–1833) to end the "inhuman traffick" of the British slave trade, a trade in which he once sought his personal wealth and fortune. But spread out between Newton's dramatic conversion as a young man and his abolitionist efforts as an old man span over four decades of pastoral letter writing—a remarkable legacy of its own.

Providentially, Newton's placement in history opened to him the full potential of letter writing in England. First, the Post Office had developed to the point where letter delivery was more affordable and reliable than ever. Second, British society was embracing a new, flexible, abbreviated, and informal style of English, perfectly suited for the post. These two critical developments propelled the eighteenth century into "the great age of the personal letter."³ And the best of these "personal letters" were written with the intent to be read aloud in households and shared with others (think blog, not e-mail). Trending in this direction, letter writing emerged as the popular social media of Newton's day, and religious leaders like Newton turned to writing pastoral letters that sometimes rivaled sermons in both substance and usefulness.⁴ Personal letters from Newton were prized and were often collected as family heirlooms. Not so with his sermons. Though respectable, they were too simple to endure the ages. And his most substantive book, a fairly detailed work titled *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, didn't sell well. So as other, superior church histories began appearing in print, and as pastoring required more of his time, Newton abandoned the future volumes he envisioned in the series. Early in his ministry, Newton became aware that his greatest gift to the church would emerge out of the time he spent alone, next to a fire, with single pages of blank paper, his pen in hand, his black ink close, and a lit pipe in his mouth as he sat and wrote pastoral letters.⁵

³Hindmarsh, 244.

⁴J. C. Ryle, *The Christian Leaders of the Last Century* (London, 1869), 291.

⁵Newton communicated this discovery to William Jay. Newton said: "[James] Hervey, who was so blessed as a writer, was hardly able to mention a single instance of conversion by his preaching, and nothing could exceed the lifelessness of his audience; and I rather reckoned upon doing more good by some of

His most popular letters proved to be his most extemporaneous, his utterances of the heart. Newton's skill in directing the attention of his readers to the glory of Jesus Christ made his letters admired.⁶ And readers appreciated Newton's clear, simple, and direct communication style. Shaped during his first sixteen years of ministry in Olney, Newton's unpretentious style served the poor, ignorant, and illiterate adults who labored in confined quarters, lacked proper nourishment, and lived under widespread struggles like poverty, nervous disorders, alcoholism, and suicide. There Newton led popular children's meetings and entered the homes of his people to listen to and care for their various spiritual struggles. In Olney, Newton honed his skill to capture the attention of children and then applied that same skill to adults.⁷

Newton first penned his autobiography in a series of letters to a friend in 1762. These letters were passed around, celebrated, and then expanded into a second series of letters for another reader the following year. Those letters became so popular they were collected and published under the title *An Authentic Narrative* (1764). The fourteen-letter autobiography propelled his status as a local celebrity, adding weight to his local preaching ministry.⁸ Newton later found success writing periodic public letters for print under the pseudonym of Omicron and Vigil (1771–1774), which he later collected, edited, and published as a book. With the positive response of that collection, he recalled some of his private letters written to his friends so they could be copied, collected, redacted of private details, and then published as the book *Cardiphonia* (1780).⁹

Today, Newton's pastoral legacy is preserved in five hundred letters written and published in his lifetime (or soon thereafter), and another five hundred letters collected and published by others after his death. Through all of these letters Newton still speaks. Modern-day pastor Timothy Keller claims John Newton as “the best pastor I've ever seen in my life,” and cites Newton

my other works than by my 'Letters,' which I wrote without study, or any public design; but the Lord said, 'You shall be most useful by *them*;' and I learned to say, 'Thy will be done! Use me as Thou pleases, only *make me useful*!' (Letters [Jay], 317). Newton wrote about his extemporaneous letters, "I seldom know how I shall begin, or when I shall end, when I take up my pen; but, as John Bunyan says, 'still as I pull, it comes,' and so I write" (Letters [More], 23).

⁶ Newton: "We should never be weary of writing and reading about Jesus. If his name sounds warm to your heart, you may call this a good letter, though I should not add a word more" (Letters [Clunie], 131).

⁷ *Eclectic*, 6–7.

⁸ Shortly after *An Authentic Narrative* was published, Newton wrote a friend (December 11, 1764): "I have reason to hope that the publication of my letters will give some additional weight to my ministry here. The people stare at me since reading them, and well they may. I am indeed a wonder to many—a wonder to myself. Especially I wonder that I wonder no more" (Letters [Clunie], 62).

⁹ *Cardiphonia* was the title (given by Cowper) to Newton's most famous collection of letters. The title is a Greek compound that simply means "utterance of the heart." At 158 letters total in length it was, Newton claimed, his most useful book (*W*, 1:97). Why? "I ascribe the blessing the Lord has given to *Cardiphonia* chiefly to this circumstance, that there was not a line written with the least thought that it would ever appear in public" (Letters [Campbell], 31).

in more sermons than he does any other figure in church history except C. S. Lewis, Jonathan Edwards, and Martin Luther.¹⁰ In 2013, Keller credited Newton's letters for this influence on his own ministry and explained why.

John Newton was not known for his stirring preaching. His sermons are actually fairly stodgy and pedestrian. However, his letters, in which he dealt with a wide variety of pastoral issues, are pure gold. Newton was able to take the great theological doctrines of the faith and apply them to the needs of friends, parishioners, even strangers who wrote for advice. In his letters he is often blunt, yet always tender. He is remarkably humble and open about his own flaws, but never in a cloying or self-absorbed manner. He is therefore able to point others to the grace of Christ on which he himself clearly depends.

Reading one of Newton's letters is like taking a hike along some path between high walls of rock or foliage that suddenly affords breathtaking views. In the midst of addressing some commonplace condition, usually with realistic detail, Newton will suddenly, almost as an aside, toss in several lines that blaze with glory.

Newton's letters have influenced both my pastoral work and my preaching. Newton did not simply call people to holy living, but he also did close analysis of their motives and showed them the specific reasons they were failing to obey God. Decades of constantly reading and re-reading the letters have taught me how to do better analysis of underlying motives, so that when the high doctrines of grace are preached and applied, they do not merely press on the will but change the heart.¹¹

¹⁰Timothy Keller, sermon, "Passive Discipline" (January 21, 1990). Throughout his preaching ministry in Manhattan (1989–present), Keller has frequently cited Newton by name in sermons (the most significant references will be noted in the footnotes of this book). In the years 1989–2004, Keller preached 985 sermons at Redeemer Presbyterian Church (Manhattan). He mentioned Newton in 75 different sermons (7.6 percent). In the first five years alone he mentioned Newton in 30 sermons (8.3 percent). Here's where Newton fits among other top names mentioned by Keller (by number of sermons): C. S. Lewis (277), Jonathan Edwards (129), Martin Luther (105), John Newton (75), Martyn Lloyd-Jones (59), Augustine (59), Charles Spurgeon (52), J. R. R. Tolkien (41), John Stott (26), and J. I. Packer (20). These numbers are impressive for their sheer quantity, and even more impressive for the specific examples where Keller translates Newton's humble counsel for Christians living in a sophisticated city like Manhattan. For this reason, Keller makes occasional cameo appearances in this book to serve as a prime example of a Christian communicator making use of Newton's pastoral wisdom today. All Keller sermon quotes taken from Timothy J. Keller, *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013). Keller's wife, Kathy, has likewise been influenced by Newton. In June 2013 she was asked what books have most profoundly shaped her ministry. She offered one title: "The letters of John Newton, mostly the collection published under the name *Utterance of the Heart (Cardiphonia)*. Nothing is more insightful about dealing with people and pastoral issues. Tim and I take people through them whenever we're able. In fact, we're both doing so now, with different groups" (accessed June 11, 2013, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2013/06/11/on-my-shelf-life-and-books-with-kathy-keller/>).

¹¹Timothy Keller, e-mail message to the author, December 18, 2013. Richard Cecil (1748–1810), a noteworthy preacher and friend to Newton, wrote of Newton's preaching ministry: "He appeared, perhaps, to least advantage in the pulpit; as he did not generally aim at accuracy in the composition of his sermons, nor at any address in the delivery of them. His utterance was far from clear, and his attitudes ungrace-

Keller is not alone in his praise of Newton the letter writer. J. I. Packer has written, “Ex-slave-trader John Newton was the friendliest, wisest, humblest and least pushy of all the eighteenth-century evangelical leaders, and was perhaps the greatest pastoral letter-writer of all time.”¹²

Newton’s superb letter-writing skills, marked with spiritual clarity, self-deprecating wit, vivid metaphor, motive-piercing acuity, and insights of blazing glory, all help to explain why Newton’s pastoral influence spread far beyond the village of Olney, beyond the city of London, beyond the eighteenth century, and now guides modern-day pastors in culturally sophisticated places like Manhattan. If Keller and Packer are right, Newton should be named among the most skilled pastors in church history.

Newton the Theologian?

But was John Newton a theologian? He displayed an incredible memory, was an avid reader, was rigorously self-educated, was a clear thinker, and tried his hand at technical writing, but he was far more comfortable as a biblicist than as a defender of any theological tradition.¹³ As he grew older, Newton grew less patient with the complex metaphysical theology of Edwards in favor of the simpler theology of Scottish Presbyterian Robert Riccaltoun (1691–1769),¹⁴ British Baptist Andrew Fuller (1754–1815),¹⁵ and Scottish Episcopalian Robert Leighton (1611–1684).¹⁶

ful. He possessed, however, so much affection for his people, and so much zeal for their best interests, that the defect of his manner was of little consideration with his constant hearers; at the same time, his capacity and habit of entering into their trials and experience gave the highest interest to his ministry among them. Besides which, he frequently interspersed the most brilliant allusions; and brought forward such happy illustrations of his subject, and those with so much unction on his own heart, as melted and enlarged theirs. The parent-like tenderness and affection which accompanied his instruction made them prefer him to preachers who, on other accounts, were much more generally popular” (W, 1:92–93; see also Aitken, 185–91).

¹² Quoted from Packer’s endorsement of J. Todd Murray, *Beyond Amazing Grace: Timeless Pastoral Wisdom from the Letters, Sermons and Hymns of John Newton* (n.p.: EP, 2007).

¹³ W, 5:85–86.

¹⁴ Despite his limited time for reading, Newton claims to have read Robert Riccaltoun’s three-volume *Works of the Late Reverend Mr. Robert Riccaltoun* (1771) three times through. When the volumes became scarce, Newton advocated for them to be reprinted. Writes Newton, “I admire him as the most original thinker I have met with. He has confirmed and enlarged my views of gospel truth” (*Letters* [Bull 1869], 329), and “I seldom meet with a human writer, to whose judgment I can implicitly subscribe in all points” (*Letters* [Campbell], 32). In another place he writes that Riccaltoun was “a man of a strong comprehensive mind, and if not an *elegant* he was a *masterly* writer. His metaphysics, I think, are a good besom [broom] to swap away the fine-spun cobweb, skeptical metaphysics, which at present are too much in fashion” (*Letters* [Campbell], 68).

¹⁵ Of Andrew Fuller’s work *The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems Examined and Compared as to Their Moral Tendency* (1794), Newton writes, “It is at once a beautiful summary of Christian doctrine, and the best conducted book of controversy that I ever met with” (*Letters* [Coffin], 84).

¹⁶ Newton appreciated all of Leighton’s writings, but was especially fond of his theological lectures, *Praelectiones Theologiae*. “I believe this book is scarce: I set the highest value upon it. He has wonderfully united the simplicity of the Gospel with all the captivating beauties of style and language” (W, 2:102).

If Newton hesitated to defend a theological system, it was out of his leading concern to center his theology on Christ crucified.¹⁷ He was certainly not afraid to say, “I am an avowed Calvinist,”¹⁸ and appears to have embraced five-point Calvinism from before he ever pastored, but he also befriended Arminian leaders who shared his love for Christ.¹⁹ Without question, the doctrines of grace seeped deep into Newton’s ministry. Once asked if he was a Calvinist, Newton plunked a lump of sugar into his tea, stirred the hot liquid, and said, “I am more of a Calvinist than anything else; but I use my Calvinism in my writing and preaching as I use this sugar. I do not give it alone, and whole; but mixed, and diluted.”²⁰ Diluted—not weakened—in a holistic and permeating way. “I think these doctrines should be in a sermon like sugar in a dish of tea, which sweetens every drop, but is no where to be found in a lump”;²¹ they should be “tasted everywhere, though prominent nowhere.”²² Convincing others to embrace Calvinism was decisively accomplished not by teaching, he said, but by experience. Often it was only after a Christian was hit by a personal trial (a “pinch”) that he or she would be finally driven to embrace the comforting truths of Calvinism. Thus, from the pulpit, Newton felt no pressure to force-feed the doctrines of Calvinism.²³ But neither was

Newton’s desire to see *Praelectiones Theologiae* translated from Latin into English was materialized. See *Theological and Expository Lectures* by Robert Leighton, D.D., Archbishop of Glasgow (London, 1828), 3–144.

¹⁷ *W*, 3:20; 4:106, 358–59; *Letters* (Coffin), 62.

¹⁸ *W*, 6:278.

¹⁹ Wrote Newton to a minister in a letter: “My part is only to say with the Apostle, ‘Grace be with all that love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity’ (Eph. 6:24). I hope my heart is with them all, whether Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists, Methodists, Seceders, Relief-Men, Moravians, etc. etc.; Nay if a Papist gave me good evidence that he loved my Savior, I would beg leave of men, and ask grace of the Lord, that I might love such Papists likewise, with a pure heart fervently. We shall be known by none of these names of party and prejudice when we meet in the kingdom of glory” (*Letters* [Ryland], 345).

²⁰ *Letters* (Jay), 308.

²¹ *Letters* (Campbell), 64.

²² *Eclectic*, 284.

²³ Newton: “I am an avowed Calvinist: the points which are usually comprised in that term, seem to me so consonant to scripture, reason, (when enlightened,) and experience, that I have not the shadow of a doubt about them. But I cannot dispute, I dare not speculate. What is by some called high Calvinism, I dread. I feel much more union of spirit with some Arminians, than I could with some Calvinists; and, if I thought a person feared sin, loved the word of God, and was seeking after Jesus, I would not walk the length of my study to proselyte him to the Calvinistic doctrines. Not because I think them mere opinions, or of little importance to a believer—I think the contrary; but because I believe these doctrines will do no one any good till he is taught them of God. I believe a too hasty assent to Calvinistic principles, before a person is duly acquainted with the plague of his own heart, is one principal cause of that lightness of profession which so lamentably abounds in this day, a chief reason why many professors are rash, heady, high-minded, contentious about words, and sadly remiss as to the means of divine appointment. For this reason, I suppose, though I never preach a sermon in which the tincture of Calvinism may not be easily discerned by a judicious hearer, yet I very seldom insist expressly upon those points, unless they fairly and necessarily lie in my way. I believe most persons who are truly alive to God, sooner or later meet with some pinches in their experience which constrain them to flee to those doctrines for relief, which perhaps they had formerly dreaded, if not abhorred, because they knew not how to get over some harsh consequences they thought necessarily resulting from them, or because they were stumbled by the miscarriages

Calvinism a relative matter for Newton; it was sweetness for the weary soul. “The views I have received of the doctrines of grace are essential to my peace,” he wrote. “I could not live comfortably a day, or an hour, without them.”²⁴ In this way Newton’s life was driven theologically. Rooted deep in personal experience, theology was the stuff of life, the stuff of Newton’s life, the stuff of the Christian life.

Still others would say, no, he was not a theologian because he did not produce large theological tomes to be churned off presses, but merely compiled single sheets of paper mailed through the post to address the immediate spiritual needs of his correspondents. This may be true, but whatever truth we find in this claim must also be applied to the Epistles of the New Testament. Newton wrote with the awareness that his best and most enduring letters could be collected later (and would be). Had he written a full-bodied theology of the Christian life, this may have actually limited him from addressing the spectrum of Christian experiences he could address by letter.

As I hope to demonstrate in this book, Newton was a theologian. When read together, his collected epistles show the extraordinary skill of a mentor who wisely fused doctrine, experience, and practice.²⁵ But he bonded these services with a unique emphasis. Newton was a spiritual doctor, and his chosen specialty, as he called it, was *cardiology*, the careful and exhaustive study of the human heart’s response to every conceivable situation and condition in this life.²⁶ From his experience as a diagnostician of the heart, Newton labored to apply the treasures of divine truth to each of the manifold circumstances faced in the Christian life. As the cover image of this book reflects, Newton was a keen-eyed student of the human heart who eagerly leaned into the human experience. In this sense he was, and remains, one of the church’s most perceptive and practical theologians on the Christian life.

Pilgrim’s Progress

Newton’s theology best works itself out in letters because Newton understood the Christian life to be a journey between two worlds (Phil. 3:12–4:1).

of those who professed them. In this way I was made a Calvinist myself; and I am content to let the Lord take his own way, and his own time, with others” (W, 6:278–79).

²⁴ W, 3:303.

²⁵ Letters (Jay), 316. Charles Spurgeon reportedly said of Newton, “In few writers are Christian doctrine, experience and practice more happily balanced than in the author of these *Letters*, and few write with more simplicity, piety and force” (source unknown).

²⁶ W, 1:477.

The journey has a dark past, a setting-out, snares and dangers along the way, and then a glorious end. Because the Pilgrim has not yet reached home, his focus remains set on the daily steps of progress. This explains Newton's deep concern with the stuff of the daily Christian life and his attraction to John Bunyan's classic allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Newton read the allegory so frequently he claims to have nearly memorized it.²⁷ And for over six years, he delivered weekly lectures to the meager farmers and dejected lace makers of Olney through the text of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.²⁸ Newton believed that explaining the storyline of Bunyan's classic was essential for preparing youth for life.²⁹ As he lectured on the allegory, he traveled slowly, once writing to a friend of these lectures, "I find this book so full of matter, that I can seldom go through more than a page, or half a page at a time."³⁰ Newton's love for the allegory, and his careful study of it, became known, and he was approached by an editor to write a preface to a 1776 edition, which he did. *The Pilgrim's Progress* was a comprehensive map, Newton wrote in the preface, "a map, so exactly drawn, that we can hardly meet with a case or character, amidst the vast variety of persons and incidents, that daily occur to our observation, to which we cannot easily point out a counterpart in the pilgrim."³¹

In Bunyan, Newton finds a like-minded model for the application of theology to various and comprehensive life situations, stages of maturity, and personality types. And while no Christian life experience is exactly like any other, all Christian journeys share certain similarities. This explains why *The Pilgrim's Progress* is perhaps the best-selling book in church history, behind only the Bible. Newton published his personal letters from a similar conviction. In Bunyan's classic we find the allegorical counterpart to Newton's letter-writing ministry.

Biographically, Bunyan and Newton share other traits. Newton, "the African blasphemer," was a monster of sin, whose debaucheries made even sailors blush. Bunyan, "the village rebel," was a man who breathed obscenities and once was rebuked by a prostitute for his swearing. Said Spurgeon of

²⁷ *Letters* (Clunie), 129.

²⁸ Newton: "I am sure Mr. Bunyan was a plain writer. I expounded or explained the first part of his *Pilgrim*, twice during my residence at Olney; each time it employed one evening in a week for more than three years. And perhaps in those lectures I came nearer to the apprehension of the poor lace-makers, and engaged their attention more, than when I spoke from the pulpit" (*Letters* [More], 6). It appears after his pastoral transition to London, he was invited to lecture through the allegory in the Wilberforce home in a setting he called "parlor preaching."

²⁹ *Eclectic*, 263.

³⁰ *W*, 6:38.

³¹ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* (London, 1776), preface.

Bunyan and Newton, “Both of them had been ringleaders in sin before they became leaders in the army of the Redeemed,” and “no man in his senses will venture to assert that there was anything in Newton or Bunyan why they should engross the regard of the Most High.”³² Each was converted by free grace. Neither forgot it. Both were later called to ministry, but neither man was afforded academic training in theology. Both took pastorates, and each relied heavily on the experience of his dramatic conversion, a careful (but fairly simple) understanding of Scripture, a vivid imagination, and street smarts, to help lead others along this journey of the Christian life.

With everything else Bunyan and Newton are remembered for, they both expressed pastoral skill creatively via popular cultural mediums to help fellow believers reach Zion. Newton’s letters were written to pilgrims on the road because Newton thought of the Christian life in terms of progressive growth. Even with all the setbacks and disappointments along the way, the true believer matures from spiritual child to adolescent to adult, or from acorn to sapling to large oak. Newton’s letters are filled with spiritual progress because Newton kept the end goal of the Christian life in view. While letters of gossip are *aimless*, Newton’s letters are always *aimed*, and they are aimed because Newton was self-consciously theologically driven. Because his theology was cohesive, he was able to point other Christians forward and able to help them move away from spiritual immaturity and toward spiritual adulthood.³³

Like Bunyan, Newton never lost sight of the pilgrim’s progress or the pilgrim’s end.

The Core of Newton’s Counsel

But is it possible to locate a unity in Newton’s letters? Because his greatest written legacy on the Christian life is his mail, we are faced with this daunting challenge from the outset. Bruce Hindmarsh, in his valuable study of Newton, wrote of the letters, “It is difficult to extract a unified core of teaching on the spiritual life” because “most of Newton’s letters were by definition *ad hoc* compositions reflecting the particular concerns

³² All details and points from C. H. Spurgeon: *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 6 (London, 1860), 73; *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 22 (London, 1876), 102; C. H. Spurgeon’s *Sermons Beyond: An Authentic Supplement to the Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 63 (Leominster, UK: Day One, 2009), 195; *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 10 (London, 1864), 76, 639–40.

³³ For the points in this paragraph, I owe a debt to J. I. Packer (personal conversation, June 2, 2012, Vancouver).

of the correspondents, an occasion within Newton's personal milieu, or a theme of immediate topical relevance."³⁴ Hindmarsh is right; each letter was situated within a particular context. At best, Newton's most pastoral letters are one-sided fragments of a conversation canvassing a broad range of themes. But again, this is true of the New Testament Epistles, and it does not prevent theologians from identifying prominent themes in the letters of Paul.

Yet because personal visitors frequently interrupted Pastor Newton's solitude, his letters are filled with a variety of "desultory" thoughts, and many of those thoughts seem to break off prematurely. However unfortunate, this fact of pastoral life in eighteenth-century England does not hinder us from identifying a single core theme (or a cluster of themes) in those letters. I believe Newton's letters are bound together by a cohesive theology of the Christian life, and as a result I believe it is possible to synthesize his pastoral counsel and discover his core message on the aim of the Christian life. This is my attempt:

John Newton's vision for the Christian life centers on the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Awakened to Christ by the new birth, and united to Christ by faith, the Christian passes through various stages of maturity in this life as he/she beholds and delights in Christ's glory in Scripture. All along the pilgrimage of the Christian life—through the darkest personal trials, and despite indwelling sin and various character flaws—Christ's glory is beheld and treasured, resulting in tastes of eternal joy, in growing security, and in progressive victory over the self, the world, and the devil—a victory manifested in self-emptying and other-loving obedience, and ultimately in a life aimed to please God alone.³⁵

To corroborate this thesis, I have combed through Newton's thousand published letters, complementing them with his sermons and hymns. What I have found is that at the core of his pastoral theology radiates the all-sufficiency of Christ. Christ is the comprehensive vision that unifies Newton's pastoral letters, his sermons, and the many hymns written out of his own spiritual experience and personal devotional life.³⁶ The glory of the ascended Jesus Christ is the North Pole magnet which fixes the

³⁴ Hindmarsh, 250.

³⁵ I wrote this thesis after studying Newton's published letters and was pleasantly surprised to later find it echoed by Newton in his summary of the Christian life in *A Review of Ecclesiastical History* (W, 3:295–96).

³⁶ Letters (Dartmouth), 248.

compass of the Christian life (Heb. 12:1–2). Newton’s Christ-centered vision of the Christian life embraces all the ultimate aims of the spiritual disciplines lived out in the local church, the family, and the marketplace, whether in rightly handling religious controversy, developing friendships, winning the battle over insecurity, overcoming weariness, finding delight in God, or enduring all seasons of suffering. Every dilemma faced and every joy embraced and every hope anticipated in the Christian life is bound up with the glory of Christ. This is the driving theme of Newton’s ministry.

Into Newton’s Heart

John Newton’s life “was stranger than the most improbable fiction.”³⁷ But this book is not a biography. Jonathan Aitken has skillfully crafted a captivating narrative of Newton’s dramatic life under the title *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007). In my debt to Aitken’s masterful storytelling, I feel no need to duplicate Newton’s life story (though I will rehearse some key moments from it).

And although this book is not a formal biography, we will pick up on Newton’s phrasing, his writing style, his wit, and some of his mannerisms. As we listen to Newton through the words he wrote, we will *meet* Newton in a very intimate way because, as Spurgeon once said, “A man’s private letters often let you into the secrets of his heart.”³⁸ This is true of Newton. In this book I’ve sought to get into his heart and mind through the doorway of his published letters. I have read and reread every letter with the goal of condensing his core message and collecting his most distinct contributions on the Christian life into one book, in his own words, to serve readers who are not inclined to labor through all the letters for themselves. And for those readers who are so inclined, I have used extensive footnotes to cite (when possible) primary sources in the public domain and editions you can find online and download and read for free.

Finally, fitting to the legacy of Newton’s pastoral heart, this book is not intended to be a laboratory specimen of his mind, sliced off to be archived or filed away in a library. Newton was a man of utility, and

³⁷ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves: A Biographical Novel of John Newton* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 7. Irwin goes on to write of her novel, “The reader may be assured that if he finds anything unbelievable of adventure or coincidence, anything excessive, either sensual or spiritual, anything improbable in emotion or devotion, that part of the book is provably factual, even understated” (ibid.).

³⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Sword and Trowel: 1868* (London, 1868), 108.

he showed little patience for theorizing about the Christian life.³⁹ We would fail to honor his pastoral legacy if this study of Newton's letters were nothing more than academic analysis. With two eyes fixed on Christ, Newton was a man of purpose and action. To honor his legacy, I will adopt his aim as my aim for this project. Think of this book as a field guide meant to get dirty, dog-eared, and faded in the clenched hands of a Christian pilgrim.

³⁹Josiah Bull: "Were we to seek, in one word, to characterize the whole of Mr. Newton's life-work, we should say its whole aim was utility" (Bull, *Life*, 322).

CHAPTER I

AMAZING GRACE

A savage ocean storm awoke the crew of the *Greyhound*, a cargo ship crammed with merchandise collected from the west coast of Africa. From port to port, the ship had been slowly filled with African gold, ivory, beeswax, and camwood (lumber). But now, late in the dark night of March 21, 1748, a twenty-two-year-old sailor named John was awakened by gale-force winds battering the ship. Waves slammed into her and ripped away the upper timbers on one side, sending water through a gaping hole into John's room. Awakened by the chaos, he jumped half naked from his bed to furiously hand pump water back into the swaying ocean.¹ With the cold saltwater pouring into the aging and broken vessel, crewmates grabbed buckets and began tossing the water back into the dark sea. Newton cranked for his life while waves broke over his head. Desperation overwhelmed the doomed crew, and John's heart pounded furiously with adrenaline-charged fears of being dumped overboard in the middle of a dark sea, weeks away from the nearest coastline. Like many sailors of his time, he couldn't swim.

As John Newton later reflected, he was unfit to live and unfit to die. The fear of death strained his energies at the water pump, but it was a battle he could not win. Saltwater waves continued crashing against the ship, and the endless ocean of water rushed over the deck faster than the men could spit it back out. The ship creaked and groaned under the assault as the crew frantically battled the angry forces of the sea.

Newton's moral life had already sunk. He was a wicked and insubordinate

¹ For a detailed account, see Aitken, 69–84.

young man with a profane tongue, flesh-driven appetites, and stone-cold heart. He had gambled his way into debt and dabbled in witchcraft. And as a young man in foreign lands, he had become sexually promiscuous. Later, as a young captain of a slave-trading ship, he may have indulged his lusts further by raping captive African women in the “sexual free-for-alls on board ship that most captains in the trade regarded as theirs by right.”² He didn’t particularly enjoy alcohol, but he drank to prompt drunkenness in others and to entertain himself by the follies the liquor encouraged in them. What is clear: Newton was immune from no sin. He delighted to lead others into temptation, later calling himself “a ringleader in blasphemy and wickedness.”³

Not content with running the broad way myself, I was indefatigable in enticing others; and, had my influence been equal to my wishes, I would have carried all the human race with me. I had the ambition of a Caesar or an Alexander, and wanted to rank in wickedness among the foremost of the human race.⁴

Life on the sea only amplified Newton’s wretched tendencies.⁵ He sailed for months in a bubble of unchecked sin, estranged from godly examples, cut off from the gospel, hardened by the dangers of sea life, and entrenched among a group of men who incited one another to sin. Life on an eighteenth-century merchant ship was the spiritually deadening climate his soul least needed.

The Wretch

If any man was unworthy of deliverance from the raging sea, it was the twenty-two-year-old sailor John Newton. In this moment Newton was focused on

² Aitken, 111. Phipps will only say Newton “probably raped slaves” (William E. Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton: Slave-Ship Captain, Hymnwriter, and Abolitionist* [Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001], 33). Aitken is convinced of it (see Aitken, 64, 93, 107, 111, 116, 169, 320). But the evidence is lacking and this conclusion is disputed. The cash value of a female slave swelled if she was carrying the child of a white man, a prospect that only incited further sexual misuse by sailors at sea (Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 33).

³ *Letters* (Taylor), 209.

⁴ *W*, 2:246.

⁵ In a preface he wrote for a book meant to reach sailors with the gospel, Newton said: “I traversed the ocean, in a great variety of situations and circumstances, near twenty years. But long, too long, I was a careless inattentive spectator of the wonders of the Lord in the great deep. My heart was hard, my language profane, my conduct most profligate and licentious. Thus I know, not only from observation, but from sorrowful experience, the disadvantages sea-men are in general under, with respect to the concerns of their precious souls. They usually pass the greatest part of their lives upon the sea, and therefore can derive little benefit either from instruction or example. Rather, they too recently strengthen and confirm each other in habits of wickedness. The frequency of their deliverances from the dangers to which they are exposed, often harden them into fearless insensibility. Thus they go on from bad to worse, strangers to God, and thoughtless of eternity” (John Ryther, *The Sea-Man’s Preacher* [London: 1803], vii–viii).

survival and frightened by the nearness of death that knocked on the door with each crashing wave. Desperate and fully expecting to die, Newton finally blurted aloud, "If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us." The Lord's name from his mouth—that word he only spouted in vain—now struck his heart like an arrow, humbling and breaking him. "I was instantly struck by my own words. This was the first desire I had breathed for mercy for many years."⁶

As with the thief on the cross facing death, the Lord ignited a marvelous work in John Newton's heart here in this "great day of turning." Although the precise time of his conversion is unknown,⁷ his plea for mercy on the sea was immediately answered. And Newton's heart, which once spewed wickedness and blasphemy, would soon become a heart gushing beloved hymns of praise to God. The same tongue that spit curses at the name of God and made sailors blush would become the tongue that steered the corporate worship of God's people in honoring God's holy name. This drowning wretch of a sailor would pen a hymn that endures in the minds and hearts of people to this day, a hymn so popular that its lyrics are as recognizable throughout the English-speaking world as any national anthem. On top of this, the lucrative African slave trade that he participated in would be ended, in part because of his abolitionist work. Newton would become a pastor, no longer leading sinners into sin but now enticing sinners away from it. In time, hundreds of souls would gather weekly on Sundays to listen to his sermons. Only God himself could have imagined what was in store for John Newton. Like Jonah running away from God, Newton was delivered from death at sea in order to preach the good news.

Though never formally trained, Newton would become a prominent pastor in two churches in England for forty-three years. He would befriend George Whitefield and John Wesley. As Newton frantically churned the water pump on March 21, 1748, he could not have imagined his life physically *continuing*; still less could he have imagined his life spiritually *thriving* under the incredible plans foreordained by God.⁸

⁶ Aitken, 76.

⁷ Newton: "I have still some faint remembrance of my pious mother, and the care she took of my education, and the impression it made upon me when I was a child, for she died when I was in my seventh year. I had even then frequent intervals of serious thoughts. But evil and folly were bound up in my heart; my repeated wanderings from the good way became wider and wider; I increased in wickedness as in years: But you have my *Narrative*, and I need not tell you how vile and how miserable I was, and how presumptuously I sat in the chair of the scorner, before I was twenty years old. My deliverance from Africa [1747], and afterwards from sinking in the ocean [1748], were almost miraculous; but about the year 1749 (I cannot exactly fix the date) the Lord, to whom all things are possible, began to soften my obdurate heart" (*Letters* [Taylor], 125).

⁸ The actual date of the storm as recorded by Newton was March 11 (OS), but due to an eleven-day shift in the calendar that occurred in 1752, the successive anniversary was celebrated by Newton on

Leading with a Limp

During that frantic night in 1748, one sailor was swept overboard and died, but Newton and his other crewmates miraculously survived the storm. They endured intense starvation for weeks as the ship limped to shore, staying afloat thanks to the buoyant cargo of beeswax and lumber. For the remainder of his life, Newton would celebrate March 21 as the annual reminder of God's gracious deliverance of his fragile life. The smashed and sinking ship provided a fitting metaphor for his spiritual state; the churning abyss clawing at him was a fitting metaphor for the flames of hell. He had been to the edge of human existence. In desperation, Newton had turned to the God he despised, grasped the hope of the gospel, and never let go.

From that day until the end of his life, Newton walked with a spiritual limp. John Newton was the chief of sinners, and if he could be saved by God's unmerited favor, no person on planet Earth was too wicked or too far beyond the reach of God's grace to be saved. If there is one point of self-understanding Newton lived with, it is that his salvation could never have originated within himself. Grace broke his life just as powerfully as an unexpected ocean storm broke his security. Out of his humble self-awareness, Newton wrote hymns as if he were composing words for himself; he preached sermons as a hungry sheep himself telling other sheep where to find food; he wrote pastoral letters as a fellow traveler with dusty feet on his own journey to the Celestial City, and as a friend with a second crutch he was willing to lend to fellow travelers. John Newton lived with a deep and abiding awareness of God's amazing grace that broke into his wicked life. And out of that redemption flowed decades of merciful pastoral care for fellow sinners.

How Sweet the Sound

For all the many themes Newton addresses in his ministry, his sermons, his hymns, and his letters, one word provides a summary of his life and testimony—*grace*. From start to finish, Newton's life in Christ was lived in grace. Grace was not only a defibrillator jolt at the beginning of his Christian life; grace was the saving and restraining power of God at every stage. "If the Lord were to leave me one hour, I should fall into gross evil. I am like a child, who dares not go across Cheapside [a bustling downtown Lon-

March 21 (NS). To avoid confusion I have chosen to use only the memorial date Newton celebrated throughout most his life, March 21.

don street], unless someone holds his hand.”⁹ For Newton, the Christian life could only be explained by God’s sustaining grace. Grace saved his wretched soul. Grace sought him out. Grace removed his spiritual blindness and opened his spiritual eyes. Grace taught him to fear God. Grace relieved his fears. Grace led him to hope. The life and ministry of Newton can all fit under the banner of grace—God’s abundant, all-sufficient, infinite, sovereign, unceasing, and amazing grace.

Fittingly, we begin this study with Newton’s most famous and most often recited words, a New Year’s Day hymn inspired by 1 Chronicles 17, a chapter that speaks of King David’s past, present, and future. Newton aptly titled the hymn “Faith’s Review and Expectation,” but today it is more widely remembered by its first two words: “Amazing Grace.” The language and biblical theology of 1 Chronicles 17 drench Newton’s hymn.¹⁰ But it’s more than instructive. Reflecting his personal practice on New Year’s, the hymn itself provides a doxological moment in time to stop to thank God for his past mercies, his present mercies, and his future mercies.

The brief hymn summarizes grace as one of the essential themes in the Christian life, from beginning to end. It originally appeared in published form like this:

¹ 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.

² ’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!

³ Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
’Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

⁹ *Eclectic*, 272.

¹⁰ Marylynn Rouse makes this perceptive connection in her resources at www.johnnewton.org. Setting the text of “Amazing Grace” alongside 1 Chronicles 17 will show just how deeply Newton’s hymn soaked up the rich biblical theology of this chapter of Scripture. Direct lines of contact are made by the terms *house/home*, *word*, and *forever*. Also notice the corresponding tenses of the hymn echoed in 1 Chronicles 17: *past* (v. 7, “I took you from the pasture”), *present* (v. 16, “Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?”), and *future* (v. 26, “O LORD, you are God, and you have promised this good thing to your servant”).

⁴The Lord has promis'd good to me,
 His word my hope secures:
 He will my shield and portion be,
 As long as life endures.

⁵Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
 And mortal life shall cease,
 I shall possess, within the veil,
 A life of joy and peace.

⁶The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
 The sun forbear to shine;
 But God, who call'd me here below,
 Will be for ever mine.¹¹

Although this book will mostly focus on Newton's letters, hymns like "Amazing Grace" are a fitting big-picture introduction into his understanding of the Christian life. The entire Christian life is here: from salvation ("sav'd a wretch like me"), through trials ("many dangers, toils, and snares"), struggles with doubts and need for divine promises ("his word my hope secures"), protection in spiritual battle ("he will my shield and portion be"), and aging and facing death ("when this flesh and heart shall fail"), to hopes for re-creation ("earth shall soon dissolve like snow"), anticipation for the beatific vision ("A life of joy and peace"), and on into eternity ("But God, who call'd me here below, / will be for ever mine"). From the beginning to the end of this autobiographical hymn, we are introduced to the unwavering grace of God throughout the Christian's immortal, eternal existence. Newton communicates this vision of the Christian life in catchy language very easily read and sung. Most of the words he uses (about 85 percent of the hymn) are one syllable, and that reveals much about Newton's commitment to clarity and simplicity, traits that spill over into all his pastoral work and explain his enduring place as a spiritual luminary so many centuries after his death.

Of course, nothing from the pen of Newton endures like this hymn. Amazon.com currently sells the song in 12,700 different versions. It has been recorded in every genre, including jazz, country, folk, classical, R&B, hip-hop—even heavy metal! The popularity of the hymn is obvious at

¹¹ W, 3:353.

sporting events and political rallies, among other settings. It endures as one of few religious songs that can be sung impromptu in public because many people (if not most people) can recite at least the first verse by heart.

The hymn is, first, brilliant biography (of David) and, second, brilliant autobiography (of Newton). Newton is the *wretch*, a term he often used to allude to his own sin and to a period of captivity he endured before his conversion. But most brilliantly of all, the hymn functions as a collective autobiography for every Christian. “Amazing Grace” is perceptive biblical theology, embraced by one man deeply moved by his own redemption, articulated for corporate worship.

Amazing Theology

In a song reaching such heights of cultural popularity, it’s easy to miss the radical claims of the lyrics. “Amazing Grace” is profoundly theological, and Reformed theology gleams like a diamond in the first two verses. The hymn is rooted in the sovereign initiative of God. It is a song about spiritually dead and spiritually blind sinners finding new life, or, rather, *being found* by God. We were lost, and grace found us. We were blind, and grace gave us sight. We were wretched, and grace initiated its saving work on us. To find grace so amazing, human boasting must be silenced, and that is essentially what the hymn accomplishes. Human boasting is excluded (Rom. 3:27).

According to records, the hymn was unveiled and first sung by Newton’s congregation in Olney on January 1, 1773. Newton had spent weeks getting it ready to kick off the New Year. On hand that Friday morning was his friend the poet William Cowper (1731–1800). But just a few hours after singing the new hymn, Cowper, who was depression-prone, was suddenly seized with a sense of despair about his relationship with God. That afternoon Cowper penned a famous hymn of his own: “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.” And later that night, overcome by nightmares and hallucinations, and believing God was now calling him to sacrifice himself in the same way he called Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, he rose from his bed, found a knife, and slashed himself.¹² He would be found before he bled to death, but Cowper would never again attend church, and the suicide attempt would be catalogued as one episode of many in his long bout with despair.

¹² Aitken, 218.

With his counsel and his hymn “Amazing Grace,” Newton “had tried hard to persuade Cowper that God’s grace is universal and never withheld from a believer, but depression closed the poet’s mind to this truth.”¹³ Cowper was convinced God had become angry with him, and Newton would spend years—decades—serving his friend’s physical needs and laboring to convince him of God’s abundant and amazing grace. Amazing grace can be a hard sell. Even today, some professing Christians find the bold message of “Amazing Grace” tough to stomach. Yet this radical message of God’s sovereign, life-transforming grace was the keynote of Newton’s ministry.

Grace is amazing, as Newton discovered firsthand on the sinking *Greyhound*. Grace is free, sovereign, and sufficient. And yet, convincing sinners of God’s free grace, as Newton would discover, was a laborious full-time task. He became an apologist of God’s free and unmerited favor and devoted his life to confirming God’s grace and applying the promises of Scripture to the lives of his parishioners, his acquaintances, and his friends; and he did so through songs, sermons, and personal letters. From the hard lessons learned at his friend’s bedside, Newton would never make the mistake of assuming grace.

Sovereign Grace

One of the most beautiful paradoxes in God’s wisdom is *sovereign grace*. The same grace that is *unmerited* is also *unstoppable*. Grace is a battering ram. Grace is forced entry. And Newton’s famous hymn is filled with this sovereign grace. In another hymn he opens with this verse:

Sovereign grace has pow’r alone
To subdue a heart of stone;
And the moment grace is felt,
Then the hardest heart will melt.¹⁴

Grace alone is powerful enough to break the sinner’s bondage to wickedness. “His grace can overcome the most obstinate habits.”¹⁵ Grace breaks in to free and unshackle souls. Grace takes away the guilt of sin, the love of sin, and the dominion of sin, even hard sins like drunkenness.¹⁶

¹³ Aitken, 229.

¹⁴ W, 3:428.

¹⁵ W, 4:328.

¹⁶ W, 4:189–90, 328.

Newton speaks firsthand of sin's self-destructive power, and firsthand of the power of grace to liberate the soul. "The mercy of God is infinite, and the power of his grace is invincible" (see Rom. 11:29).¹⁷ And the same invincible grace that brings salvation is the same grace that is "training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Titus 2:12). Only grace breaks us free from the power of self-destructive sins and empowers the true freedom of obedience (Rom. 6:14).

Understanding God's sovereign grace at the front end of the Christian life is critical for understanding the rest of the Christian life, because we are certain to face personal sin and insufficiency all throughout the Christian journey. What hope is there for a redeemed Christian who sees indwelling sin still lurking in his heart? If justification can be explained only by the sovereign grace of God, then sanctification can be rooted only in the same cause. God's sovereign grace stabilizes the Christian life. Newton explains, "That I am still preserved in the way, in defiance of all that has arisen from within and from without to turn me aside, must be wholly ascribed to the same sovereignty," that is, the same sovereignty that saved him.¹⁸

Grace Builds off a Blueprint

As we will see many times, Newton is a master craftsman of metaphor, and he employs every image at his disposal to explain the Christian life.¹⁹ In one place, he explains the Christian life with a building metaphor framed by Paul's words in Philippians: "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (1:6). Paul's "good work" was the Christian life in its complete form.

In a large building project the foundations are laid deep. Metaphorically, grace works below the soil and out of view to lay the sturdy foundations of the Christian life. Down under the soil the work seems slow, and then the walls begin to go up. But so does the scaffolding. The building progresses behind this scaffolding, and in broad daylight the mess and trash and broken stones and building materials lying around the site cloud the progress from many bystanders. The progress is obscured by the rubble. This is the perspective we often have of ourselves and other Christians. The

¹⁷ Letters (Palmer), 129.

¹⁸ W, 2:108.

¹⁹ See Newton's poem "A Thought on the Sea Shore" (W, 3:670).

Christian life is a hard-hat area, and we struggle to see God's "good work" coming together in the mess of our lives.

How different is the view of the architect. The architect has done this many times before, and he perceives the end of the project from the first stone to the final shrub. He can steer the progress along to the end he designed. He may need to adjust the materials or change the schedule, but even in the jobsite mess, the end product is clear in his imagination. In time, the project will be finished: the scaffolding will be removed, the debris cleaned up, the discarded building supplies taken away, the windows and floors polished, and the project delightful in its completion. Writes Newton:

Men, indeed, often plan what, for want of skill or ability, or from unforeseen disappointments, they are unable to execute: but nothing can disappoint the heavenly Builder; nor will he ever be reproached with forsaking the work of his own hands, or beginning that which he could not or would not accomplish (Phil. 1:6). Let us therefore be thankful for beginnings, and patiently wait the event.²⁰

Grace finishes what the divine Architect planned. As the builder, grace never walks off the job or leaves the project unfinished. The Christian life is always progressing behind scaffolding and debris that clouds our vision and makes it difficult for us to gauge the work of grace in our lives and the lives of other Christians. Yet we are confident that grace executes the Architect's blueprint. Newton is confident that even when it feels like the construction has stopped, grace continues to labor. This trust in the active work of grace in the Christian life helped Newton keep his trust in God when his spirits were low or when progress was obscured. The work of grace progresses from behind the scaffold, until the great unveiling (1 John 3:2). This event is on schedule and the infallible Architect will deliver the end product, all by grace.

All-Sufficient, Red-Letter Grace

While Newton is most famous for the phrase *amazing grace*, he much preferred the phrase *sufficient grace*. The two are not unrelated, but *sufficient grace* was more common in his vernacular because few (if any) Bible pas-

²⁰ W, 1:637–38.

sages more clearly shaped his thinking of the Christian life than Paul's testimony of grace in the Christian life in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10.

A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "*My grace is sufficient for you*, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The Christian life is not comfortable. God makes us no promises to remove difficult circumstances, or alleviate our pains, or protect us from suffering, but he does promise *sufficient grace* for all our wants and needs. In his pain, Paul learned there is a full supply of grace for all God's children. This is not merely *adequate grace*, but *all-sufficient grace*. No matter how large and daunting the circumstance or need, grace is always larger and stronger and more fully sufficient to meet each battle or trial in the Christian life.

Deeply moved by Paul's words, Newton not surprisingly wrote multiple hymns on grace, including one titled "My Grace Is Sufficient for Thee." In it he elaborates further on the perspective-altering power of God's sufficient grace in light of the pains and struggles of the Christian life. The hymn opens with two verses of violent, descriptive words to recreate Paul's desperation. If "Amazing Grace" gives us a macro-look at grace and the Christian life, "My Grace Is Sufficient for Thee" is a micro-look into how grace gets applied to the warfare in the Christian life.

Opress'd with unbelief and sin,
 Fightings without, and fears within;
 While earth and hell, with force combin'd,
 Assault and terrify my mind:

What strength have I against such foes,
 Such hosts and legions to oppose?
 Alas! I tremble, faint, and fall;
 Lord, save me, or I give up all.

Paul faced physical pain and outward oppression in his ministry, but here Newton applies the passage to the violent spiritual assaults against temptations, indwelling sin, the flesh, unbelief, the world, and a host of demonic foes. All the Christian's allied enemies crash on him at once. He trembles, he faints, and he falls to his knees. The combined force of the enemies quickly overwhelms the internal supplies of the Christian. In desperation, Newton cries out for deliverance.

Thus sorely prest, I sought the Lord,
To give me some sweet, cheering word;
Again I sought, and yet again;
I waited long, but not in vain.

Oh! 'twas a cheering word indeed!
Exactly suited to my need;
"Sufficient for thee is my grace,
Thy weakness my great pow'r displays."

The answer comes, but not immediately. And when it does arrive, the answer is not an alleviation of suffering, but the promise of all-sufficient grace to endure with joy. When sufficient grace breaks in, the entire mood of the hymn changes, even as the battles rage on. Notice how the hymn concludes with the mood-altering effect of this "awakening" to the sufficiency of God's grace.

Now I despond and mourn no more,
I welcome all I fear'd before;
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.²¹

Only all-sufficient grace can account for the change of tone in this hymn. Grace alone is powerful enough to comfort Newton in his darkest trial, under the most persistent pain, and under attack on all fronts. God's

²¹ W, 3:449–50.

solution to trials may not always be an escape from circumstances, but may be a stable and ever-present response from God to those who ask. *My grace is sufficient for you.* “Such an assurance was more valuable than the deliverance he sought could be.”²²

“I am nothing, Christ is all.” The all-sufficient grace of God provides us the context for discovering our insufficiencies. Grace welcomes us to look into our emptiness and personal weakness because our strength and security is outside of us, in God’s all-sufficient grace. Our owning of personal weakness is one of the results of the active presence of grace. And our weakness is how we broadcast the grace of God to others.

Look closely and you’ll notice something curious in 2 Corinthians 12:9. Red-letter Bibles print this verse in blood-red text. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness,” is a phrase from the lips of the Savior to Paul, pushing us closer to the heart of Newton’s theology, and closer to the heart of this book.

No Such “Thing” as Grace

The absence of the word *grace* from my book title and subtitle is not accidental. By personifying grace, “Amazing Grace” can be somewhat misleading to modern readers. It is certainly not wrong to put verbs after grace (e.g., Titus 2:11). Grace *saves* wretches. Grace *searches out* lost sinners. Grace *removes* spiritual blindness and *gives* spiritual sight. Grace *teaches* us to fear God. Grace *relieves* fear. But in our modern culture, where *grace* has become a synonym for *kindness*, “Amazing Grace” becomes a sort of hymn to the transforming power of niceness or, a little better, grace becomes abstracted divine benevolence. In either case, grace is depersonalized.

This misunderstanding of grace has led Sinclair Ferguson to go so far as to say there actually is no such *thing* as grace.²³ It has led Michael Horton to declare that grace is “not a third thing or substance mediating between God and sinners, but is Jesus Christ in redeeming action.”²⁴ Their point is the same. We must resist the temptation to morph grace into spiritual currency or some abstracted spiritual power that mysteriously ebbs and

²² W, 2:316.

²³ “Grace is not a ‘thing.’ It is not a substance that can be measured or a commodity to be distributed. It is ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor. 13:14). In essence, it is Jesus Himself” (Sinclair B. Ferguson, *By Grace Alone: How the Grace of God Amazes Me* [Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2010], xv).

²⁴ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 267–68.

flows. Grace is not dished out in spiritual gold coins of merit (a serious medieval Roman Catholic error confronted in the Reformation). No. Thinking of grace as spiritual currency is mistaken. To say there is no such *thing* as grace means that all the grace we have and can ever hope to have—all the sovereign grace, all the all-sufficient grace—is bound up in the favor of the Father and in our union with the Son.

If you have Christ, you have all of Christ, and to have all of Christ is to have free access to Christ's all-sufficient grace. Grace is not a gate to fence us back from Christ. Grace is not a substitute for Christ. Grace does not stand between me and Christ. Rather, says Calvin, "All graces are bestowed on us through Christ."²⁵ *Grace* is shorthand for the full and free access we have to all the merits and power and promises to be found *in the person of our Savior* (John 1:16–17; Eph. 2:7; 1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Cor. 8:9; 2 Tim. 2:1). Repeatedly, Newton accents "the grace *that is in Christ Jesus*." Grace is a stream from Christ, the fountain of all grace, he writes.²⁶ The "water of life" (Rev. 22:17) "stands for the communication of every grace from Jesus Christ. He is the fountain (John 7:37–39). [The outpouring of grace] is compared to water, for it is plenty. There is abundance of grace—a fountain, a river, an ocean (Isa. 44:3)."²⁷ "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace," writes the apostle John (John 1:16). "All the streams of grace flow from Christ, the fountain," Newton concludes.²⁸

In a letter to his eminent friend Hannah More, Newton wrote:

When we understand what the Scripture teaches of the person, love, and offices of Christ, the necessity and final causes of his humiliation unto death, and feel our own need of such a Savior, we then know him to be the light, the sun of the world and of the soul, the source of all spiritual light, life, comfort and influence; having access to God by him, *and receiving out of his fullness grace for grace*.²⁹

And thus, "we are gradually prepared to live more out of ourselves, and to

²⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1853), 357.

²⁶ W, 1:417; 2:574; 3:20; 6:253.

²⁷ John Newton, *365 Days with Newton*, ed. Marylynn Rouse (Leominster, UK: Day One, 2006), 122. Here I use the Logos software pagination.

²⁸ W, 1:417. To be fair, Paul sometimes speaks of grace (χάρις) without mentioning Christ. In these cases he appears to be speaking of grace as a mobilizing force or a spiritual gift for certain tasks (see Rom. 1:5; 12:3; 15:15; 1 Cor. 3:10; 15:10; 2 Cor. 9:8; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 3:7–8; Phil. 1:7). But ultimately, all the grace that gifts or mobilizes is a grace purchased in Christ and distributed by him (Eph. 4:7–8).

²⁹ *Letters* (Bull 1869), 350.

derive all our sufficiency of every kind from Jesus, the fountain of grace.”³⁰ Such dependence on Christ empowers us: “Oh, it is a great thing to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus!” (2 Tim. 2:1).³¹

In whatever ways our modern culture hears Newton’s hymn as an abstracted and depersonalized divine blessing, his intent is clear. Christ “is the Fountain, the Sun, the Treasury of all grace.”³² When Newton speaks of grace, he is speaking of Christ in union with the believer. Newton’s *grace* is ever “*My grace*,” a sovereign grace, all-sufficient grace, alone-sufficient grace that flows freely and fully from the person of Jesus Christ. “By nature we are separated from the divine life, as branches broken off, withered and fruitless,” Newton writes. “But grace, through faith, unites us to Christ the living Vine, from whom, as the root of all fullness, a constant supply of sap and influence is derived into each of his mystical branches, enabling them to bring forth fruit unto God, and to persevere and abound therein.”³³ A life in union with Christ is “the life of grace.”³⁴

In our abiding union with Christ we find the context of the Christian life. Grace not only connects us to Christ; grace is the daily motivation for us to press closer toward Christ, to “be daily hungering and thirsting after him, and daily receiving from his fullness, even grace for grace; that you may rejoice in his all-sufficiency, may taste his love in every dispensation.”³⁵ We seek *more grace* by seeking to experience *more Christ*.

Amazing Grace, Amazing Christ, Smoking Flax

Discovering the amazingness of grace requires that we focus on the amazingness of Christ in the theology and life of Newton. All we have is Christ. Separated from him, there is no saving or sanctifying grace for the Christian life. United to Christ, there is full and free access to the full riches of Christ, who is the fountain of all grace. Newton expressed this union perhaps most fully and beautifully in his sermon on Matthew 11:27.

The great God is pleased to manifest himself in Christ, as the God of grace. This grace is manifold, pardoning, converting, restoring, persevering grace, bestowed upon the miserable and worthless. Grace finds the

³⁰ W, 1:430–31.

³¹ W, 2:105.

³² *365 Days with Newton*, 236.

³³ W, 1:322.

³⁴ W, 4:333.

³⁵ W, 6:47.

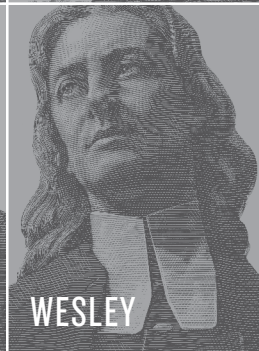
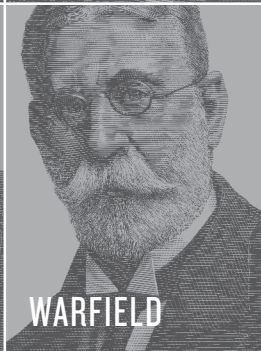
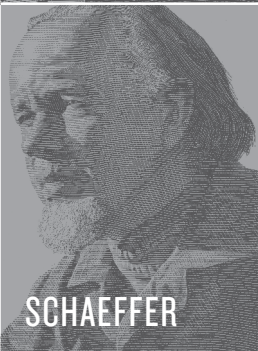
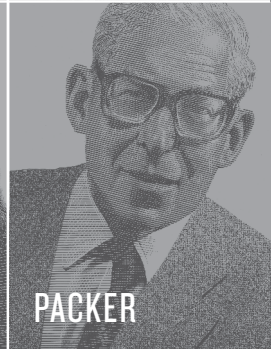
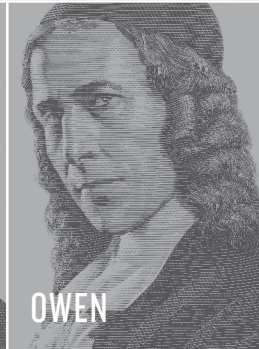
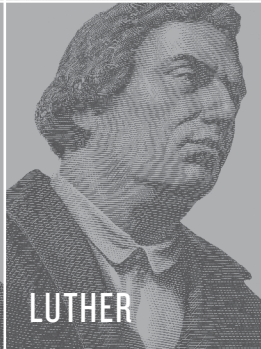
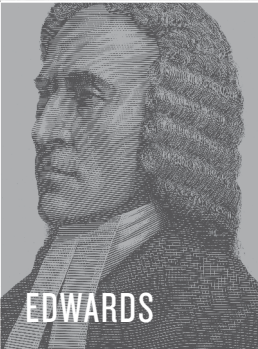
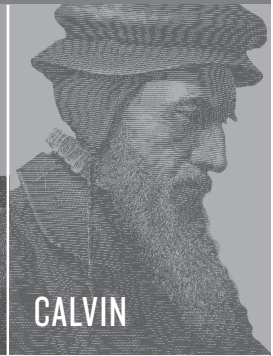
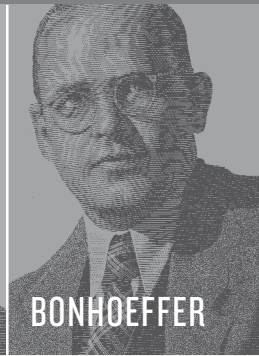
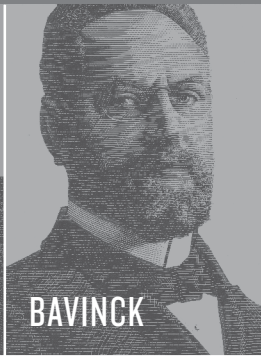
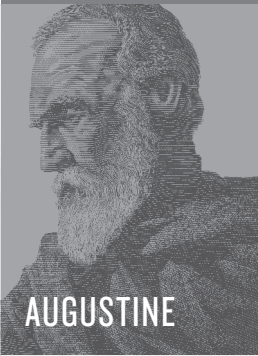
sinner in a hopeless, helpless state, sitting in darkness, and in the shadow of death. Grace pardons the guilt, cleanses the pollution, and subdues the power of sin. Grace sustains the bruised reed, binds up the broken heart, and cherishes the smoking flax into a flame. Grace restores the soul when wandering, revives it when fainting, heals it when wounded, upholds it when ready to fall, teaches it to fight, goes before it in the battle, and at last makes it more than conqueror over all opposition, and then bestows a crown of everlasting life. But all this grace is established and displayed by covenant in the man Christ Jesus, and without respect to him as living, dying, rising, reigning, and interceding in the behalf of sinners, would never have been known.³⁶

Grace is not currency dispensed from an impersonal, computerized ATM. Grace is deeply personal, it is glue, securing the branch of our Christian life into the trunk of Christ's all-sufficiency. Grace binds us to the person of Christ, to his vital life, and to the full spectrum of his all-sufficient benefits. Before we learn from Newton about the common challenges of the Christian life, before we study the particular blemishes of Christian character, before we study his instructions to those who are discouraged and depressed, before we see his balm for the pain and trials and the insecurities Christians face, and before we can learn from him about trying to do business in the world, or about how to honor God in our marriages, or about how to deal with particular indwelling sins—before we look at any of these particulars, we must understand the root of all grace, Jesus Christ.

³⁶ W, 2:442.

WISDOM FROM THE PAST FOR LIFE IN THE PRESENT

Other volumes in the Theologians on the Christian Life series



Visit
crossway.org/TOCL
for more
information.

John Newton is famous for his legendary hymn “Amazing Grace.” Many have celebrated his dramatic conversion from a life in the slave trade to his eventual work to end it. But often overlooked are Newton’s forty years as a pastor ministering to parishioners and friends unsettled by the trials, doubts, and fears of life.

Newton is perhaps the greatest pastoral letter writer in the history of the church. He took up his pen day after day to help others fix their eyes on Christ, which, he writes, is the underlying battle of the Christian life. Through a careful study of scores of letters, Tony Reinke brings together Newton’s brilliant vision of the Christian life in one accessible place.

“Here is mastery! Reinke distills a vast flow of pure honey for the Christian heart. This is a book to read over and over again.”

J. I. PACKER, Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology, Regent College

“*Newton on the Christian Life* is a magnum opus. A bold project, beautifully done. You know about John Newton; now you can be pastored by him.”

ED WELCH, counselor and faculty member, The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation

“Linger long here. The depths and riches within these pages are truly rare, and answer what your soul most hungers for: life in Christ. I will be returning to this book many, many times over.”

ANN VOSKAMP, *New York Times* best-selling author, *One Thousand Gifts*

TONY REINKE is a former journalist who serves as a staff writer and researcher at desiringGod.org. He is the author of *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books* and hosts the popular *Ask Pastor John* podcast. Reinke and his wife live in Minneapolis with their three children.

The Theologians on the Christian Life series provides accessible introductions to the great teachers on the Christian life.

WISDOM FROM THE PAST FOR LIFE IN THE PRESENT

CHRISTIAN LIFE / PERSONAL GROWTH