

Even in the Dark of Night



John Newton is a name known throughout Christendom – and to many of the secular community at large – for the powerful, comforting, encouraging, and inspiring hymn he wrote – *Faith's Review and Expectation*, which has come to be called by its opening phrase, *Amazing Grace*.

And his life, too, was amazing, filled with highs and lows, describing himself in his youth – when he was held captive as a slave of the wife of a slave dealer – as “a servant of slaves in West Africa,” rising to a lifetime of influence and achievement, including becoming a leading figure in Britain’s abolition of the African slave trade in 1807.

Newton started his career at sea at a young age, and worked on slave ships in the slave trade for several years. He was an English sailor in the Royal Navy for a period and later a captain of slave ships.

During a 1748 voyage to England, the ship encountered a severe storm off the coast of Donegal, Ireland, and almost sank. Newton awoke in the middle of the night and, as the ship filled with water, called out to God. The cargo shifted and stopped up the hole, and the ship drifted to safety. Newton marked this experience as the beginning of his conversion to evangelical Christianity.

In his spare time, Newton studied Greek, Hebrew and Syriac, preparing for serious religious study. He became well-known as an evangelical lay minister in 1757, and applied to be ordained as a priest in the Church of England. Finally, on June 17, 1764, he was ordained into the priesthood.

Newton was completely devoted to his wife, Mary. Their relationship was one of the most tender in Christian history. They sometimes worried that their love for each other was almost idolatrous.

One day, she broke the news that a famous surgeon had diagnosed her with cancer. Newton’s anguish was terrible. He said he felt like a bull caught in a net.

When she died 15 months later, friends worried because he seemed inconsolable.

But then, strengthened in his faith, Newton preached her funeral, choosing as his text Habakkuk 3:17-18: “Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food ... yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will joy in the God of my salvation.”

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Newton's experience demonstrates that we can still focus on God in worship, even when we don't understand His decisions and directions in our lives. We're caught in time and trapped in transience.

God, who transcends all, is eternal and infinite. We don't always understand, but He knows. He cares.

God works things together for good. He is worthy to be praised, even in the dark of night. We can yet rejoice in Him.

– Beecher Hunter