

**JOHN  
NEWTON**



# JOHN NEWTON

*AUTHOR OF AMAZING GRACE*

ANNE SANDBERG



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# PREFACE

For over two hundred years the song “Amazing Grace” by John Newton has been sung and loved by Christians worldwide. It is included in hymnals of most traditional and evangelical churches. Almost everyone knows the first verse by memory:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

But not everyone knows that when Newton wrote that song he was not being merely poetic, but truthful and grateful. Few who sing those words know how much of a wretch he really had been—how sinful, how blasphemous, how licentious and rebellious against God and man.

Nor do many know of his great love for a woman which sustained him through his terrible punishment as a deserter from the British navy; through his humiliations while engaged in the slave trade; through being shipwrecked. These were some of the “many dangers, toils and snares” through which he had “already come.”

Eventually this sinful atheist became a famous minister, writer, and hymn writer.

THIS SINFUL  
ATHEIST  
BECAME  
A FAMOUS  
MINISTER AND  
HYMN WRITER.

In the early days of his walk with God, he was influenced by the great Wesleyan and Whitefield revivals. Also, because of his experiences in the slave trade, he was one of the early supporters of the abolition of slavery in England.

Since Newton lived over two centuries ago, I have had to imagine details of his actions, thoughts and events. However, the “imaginative” part is not merely fanciful but an attempt to visualize just how and what happened, keeping true to facts known and recorded, which included real names of people, places, and ships.

The factual material in this book was obtained from the biography of John Newton written by Bernard Martin of England. Mr. Martin had access to Newton’s letters, diaries, slave-trading journal, etc. I have used this biography as source for the facts, dates, names of people, places, and ships. I consider this book to be completely authentic.

I have also used material from *An Authentic Narrative*, an autobiography by Newton, written in 1764. Since this volume is quite brief and incomplete, I believe my account of his life will give a fuller knowledge and appreciation of this man who, because of God’s amazing grace to him, became a well-known man of God in his day.

ANNE SANDBERG



# 1

## “HOW FAR TO MAIDSTONE?”

Early on a December morning in 1742, young John Newton began his long hike out of London—his lean, sea-bronzed face betraying lack of enthusiasm. “Always have to do what the old gentleman says,” he grumbled. “I’ll be glad when I’m back at sea, away from his nagging.”

Morosely, he strode through the narrow cobblestone streets, head down, mind churning with rebellion against his father. At the outskirts of the city, he found the stables and rented a horse for the trip which, unknown to him, was to shape the rest of his life.

“How far to Maidstone?” he asked the proprietor, digging into his pocket for the money.

“If you take the shortcut through the woods, it will be about fifty kilometers.” The man eyed the blue-checked middie blouse, long, wide trousers and flat cap of the youth. “What’s a sailor doing on a horse?” he quipped. “Out to see one of your lady friends before sailing?”

Annoyed by the obvious reference to “A girl in every port,” and offended by his impertinence, Newton replied coldly. “Nothing like that. Just an errand for my father.”

He paid the fee and leaped onto his horse. The proprietor,

hands on hips, watched him disappear in a spray of snow. “These young fellows! Nothing but speed, speed. He’ll kill that old mare.”

John didn’t think it necessary to satisfy the curiosity of the man by informing him that after he had finished his father’s business in Maidstone, he was going a few miles north, to the Catlett home in Chatham.

As he bolted through the woods he thought wryly, *It would be more exciting if I were going to spend the evening with a luscious young wench instead of an old woman I hardly know.*

He slowed his pace while he wrapped his woolen scarf once more around his throat, shivering in the cold and mumbling discontentedly.

“What an idiot I am! Father sends me on an errand to Maidstone and what do I do but tell him, ‘Mrs. Catlett wrote that if I am ever in her vicinity, to stop by. . . .’”

“And what does the old gentleman do—instead of just giving his consent, he practically orders: ‘After you finish the business at Maidstone—before you return to London—I want you to visit Mrs. Catlett. It’s close by.’”

John’s face registered a strange blend of distaste and rebellion.

Urging his horse faster, he plunged through the unfamiliar terrain, with regard neither for his old steed nor for himself. Twice the horse tripped over snow-covered stumps, the second time Newton’s hat fell off. Cursing, he stopped to retrieve it, shook off the snow and characteristically blamed the nearest object—the horse. “Drat this old mare! That fellow must have rented me the worst nag in the stables. Just like the rest of the

old folks; can't trust a young fellow!”

He stopped at Maidstone and tended to his father's business. Then he leaped back onto his horse and began on a gallop toward Chatham. Suddenly he stopped. “I don't know about going there,” he mused. “I'm not doing it! She invited me, but I didn't make any promises. . . .” As he sat on the horse, irresolute, the beast began to tremble with the cold, so with a shrug, John said, “All right, let's go.”

His brow puckered as he galloped along. “What will I do at the Catlett's place?” (Even

“ALL I'M USED TO IS SAILOR TALK, PLUS LIQUOR, CURSES.”

his experience as a rookie sailor had not cured him of his basic shyness and dread of meeting with new people.) “What will I say? I don't have polished manners. Been with roughs too much. All I'm used to is sailor talk, plus liquor, curses; women, curses, drunken brawls, curses. . . . What if I accidentally let loose a curse word? What if. . .

“Well, how do you behave in genteel society?”

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Catlett. How are you? And how are the children?” He heard there were five.

“Drat it, that's no way to talk to a person who was so kind to my sick mother. I'm *obligated* to her. . . . Oh, how I hate being obligated to anybody. . . . But I am. . . I should be. . .

“Maybe I should say, ‘Mrs. Catlett, I appreciate so much what you did for my mother during her last illness. . . .’ No, I might break down. What would they think of a seventeen-year-old boy, man, sailor, whatever. . . shedding tears?”

For ten miles he worried as he galloped through woods, past

snow-covered fields, past farm houses nestled snugly in small plots of land—all looking so tranquil in contrast to his inward turmoil.

Suddenly, he slowed his pace. He had been thinking so hard that he had not been paying attention to his surroundings. “Where on earth am I by now?” he exclaimed. As he looked around, he noticed the cottages huddled more and more closely.

“Oh, no, I’ll soon be there! I’ve got to think up the right thing to say.” He frowned deeply then quickly brightened. “Why not just be myself! That’s right. Just say what’s natural, and that would be—of course—the first thing I’d want to do is express my appreciation for Mrs. Catlett’s care of Mother.”

His mother.

It has been ten years ago when he was only seven. For a long time his mother had been ailing; and then, that awful day! He would always remember it. His father, Captain Newton, was at sea and would not return for about a year. Then she came—that kind Mrs. Catlett—and said, “Johnny, your mother is very sick and must get way from London. It is bad for consumption. I’m going to take her to my country home in Chatham and nurse her.”

His eyes alight with excitement, he had eagerly turned to his mother, “When are we going, Mama?”

“I am sorry, my son,” his mother had replied, fixing those big, sunken eyes on his face, so tenderly, so sadly; “but you must stay here with neighbors until your father returns from sea.” How

“NO, MAMA, NO.  
DON’T LEAVE ME.  
PLEASE, MAMA.”

could he ever forget that terrible, that heartbreaking moment! “No, Mama, no. Don’t leave me. Please, Mama.” Sobbing, he had flung

himself into her arms. Holding him tightly, stroking his head, his mother had told him, “Now be a good little man. Don’t cry anymore. After I get well, I will come back for you. I will pray for you every day. God will take care of you.”

It wasn’t only the anguish of being parted from his mother that terrified the child, but the prospect of being now in the care of his austere, seafaring father whom he seldom saw and whom he feared.

For a long moment mother and son had clung together, then Mrs. Newton pulled herself away. Through tear-blurred eyes Johnny had watched Mrs. Catlett support his mother, so weak that she could hardly step up into the carriage. Still sobbing, little John had gazed as the carriage go smaller and smaller and then was out of sight. He never saw his mother again. It had been a fatal illness. And now ten years later, John had received a letter from Mrs. Catlett saying, “If you are ever in this vicinity, why not visit us?”

Previously John’s father had prevailed upon a wealthy merchant friend, Joseph Manesty, to get John a job in Jamaica. But since it would be two weeks before sailing time, his father had sent John on an errand.

Now John’s gallop became a trot, then a slow walk as he looked around. Stopping at the nearest cottage, he inquired as to where the Catletts lived. A middle-aged woman, vigorously shoveling her walk, paused in her task long enough to give directions.

The house was easy to find—a rather large, two-story dwelling surrounded by a white fence, a spacious yard on each side and trees in the back. Slowly dismounting John braced himself. The dreaded moment had come.



## 2

# THE CATLETT HOME

Tying his horse to a post, John pushed open the gate then stood stock still as a dog bounded toward him barking furiously; chickens squawked and the cat fled in alarm. Not anxious to have an encounter with the dog, John dared not proceed. In a moment the front door opened and people poured out: a stocky, hardy-looking man, a plump, pink cheeked woman of middle age, a youth, three young children, and a pretty girl, maybe sixteen.

Before he could begin his rehearsed speech, Mrs. Catlett threw her arms around him. “Of course you are John. You look just like your dear mother, God bless her memory.”

The rest of the family gathered around. First, Mr. Catlett placed his hand on John’s shoulder in a friendly gesture. Next, the youth shook his hand, the children stared and the girl smiled shyly—no, not exactly shyly; she was friendly and winsome. Not brazen like the girls he had met at seaports. No, not like them. This girl was different.

**NOT BRAZEN  
LIKE THE GIRLS  
HE HAD MET  
AT SEAPORTS.  
THIS GIRL WAS  
DIFFERENT.**

“Come in, come in,” cried Mrs. Catlett, leading the way. “Do

sit down, you must be tired. Jack take his horse to the barn.” John walked into the living room and sat stiffly in the comfortable chair she offered near the fireplace. The others stood or sat nearby. For a while John held his hat on his lap, feeling rather nervous, until the young girl Mary smilingly took it from him and hung it in the hall.

John quickly surveyed the room. It was large and many-windowed. The furniture was more durable than elegant, yet homey and comfortable looking, bearing the marks of years of wear.

And now began the happy confusion of questions and comments. “How far did you travel? How long can you stay? It’s hard to realize that the little boy of seven is now such a handsome young man.”

After the chatter subsided, Mrs. Catlett and Mary bustled into the kitchen for refreshments. Their departure left an awkward silence. No one seemed to have anything more to say. The ticking of the clock accentuated the silence. Then the cat came to the rescue. He leaped onto John’s lap and began purring.

“I hope you don’t mind the cat,” apologized Mr. Catlett. His quiet voice belied the rugged strength of his appearance, his large, rough hands, his broad, muscled shoulders. Instinctively, John knew that this man was not adept at making conversation.

“No, I don’t mind,” said John as he stroked the cat. “I never had a pet when I was a child, so I enjoy this little creature.”

“I’m glad that you feel that way,” Mr. Catlett replied. The silence which followed confirmed John’s feeling that neither Mr. Catlett nor his son Jack were very communicative. But to John’s relief, the children began telling of the escapades of their cat and



dog—"Once our dog. . ." And so the time passed pleasantly.

John was relieved to see the two ladies emerge from the kitchen with tea and little cakes.

Whether deliberately or accidentally, Mary sat directly across from him in full view of his appreciative glances. Mr. Catlett and Jack took opposite sides of the table and the children sat in between. For the next few minutes, everyone was occupied with eating, Mother signaling to the small children lest they should take more than a discreet portion. In between mouthfuls, they all plied John with more questions.

John tried to answer them all. To Mrs. Catlett he said, "My father is in the West Indies getting slaves. He'll sell most of them to the American colonies—they use them on their big plantations." Jack, the youth his own age, questioned, "What do you think of the slave trade?" John turned toward the young man, looking into alert and intelligent eyes.

**"MY FATHER  
IS IN THE  
WEST INDIES  
GETTING  
SLAVES."**

"I haven't given much thought to it. It's a very profitable business and beneficial to the savages. Whoever buys them will teach them civil manners and of course, religion."

"Yes," replied Jack, his manner indicating a readiness to argue, "but do you think it is right to sell people like cattle?"

Looking embarrassed, Jack's father interrupted, "My son is attending law school and has acquired some liberal ideas. Don't take him too seriously."

But Jack's question sank into the deep recesses of John's mind, to bear fruit years later.

And the girl, smiling at him across the table, asked, “How do you like being a sailor? To get to see different lands?” John liked the way she tilted her head, dreamily looking off into the distance, then turning to him for his reply.

He looked at her so often that he was afraid it would be noticed, *Charming*, he found himself thinking. *Could she read his thoughts? Did she see his interest?* He stumbled a little as he answered her questions, angry at himself when he blushed.

Unaware of John’s embarrassment at the betrayal of his interest in her daughter, Mrs. Catlett kept on talking. “Do you remember much about your mother? You were not quite seven when she—went to her eternal reward.”

Before he could answer she turned to the children. “Now you must leave some of those cakes for our special guest.” Then she settled more comfortably into her chair and looked at John. He had already framed his answer to her first question, when he discovered she had a disconcerting way of losing the thread and changing to other subjects.

**“YOUR MOTHER  
DECLARED SHE  
WAS SURELY  
GOING TO  
HEAVEN.”**

“Your mother declared she was surely going to heaven. You know, the church of England discourages such claims with the parson.” She paused a moment and seemed to peer at John for his answer. It made him feel uncomfortable. But she unabashedly continued, “Of course, you know your mother was a Dissenter. Or perhaps you were too young to understand?”

Mrs. Catlett and Jack exchanged glances. “Mother was talkative—there was no way of stopping her. But why did she get on

this controversial subject?"

Looking a little puzzled, John replied, "I do remember a little about that. Father was a moral man but had no religious leanings. Still, he didn't object to Mother's associations with the Dissenters. She took me to their meetings. Mother was very pious and taught me a lot of. . .religion. . .and other things."

"Indeed she taught you many things," exclaimed Mrs. Catlett. "She told me you could read scripture at age four. And Latin at age six."

She looked into the faces of her younger children, who seemed more interested in cookies than in Latin. "See," their mother said, "if you apply yourselves like John did, you can learn, too." Then she signaled Mary to move the cookies less temptingly near the children.

Looking amused at the gesture, John turned to his hostess: "I guess I was different from most children. I would rather stay indoors and study with Mother than go out to play." He saw the children's faces cloud with dismay at the price to pay for learning Latin at age six. "Of course," he added hastily, "it's fine for children to play; it makes them strong in body and happy in spirit." The children sighed with relief.

"She gave me lessons out of Isaac Watts' book for children, *Preservatives from the Sins and Follies of Youth*. I memorized the whole book."

"Oh, we have that book," one of the children broke in. "But Mama doesn't ask us to memorize it. She just reads it to us and asks questions."

Another child jumped up saying, "I'll get it," pushed his chair

from the table and headed for the bookcase. Upon that Mrs. Catlett remarked, "Perhaps we should all go into the parlor; the chairs are more comfortable. And John, you take the same chair beside the fireplace."

"Here's the book," the child said, handing it to John.

"Oh, thank you," John said, his face alight with memories as he turned the pages.

### 3

## STORIES IN THE PARLOR

As the various family members settled in chairs near him, John inwardly groaned at the thought of the “sins and follies of youth” which he had already committed. And of his present doubts as to the existence of God, for another book was influencing him at this time—the one written by atheist Lord Shaftesbury.

Mrs. Catlett leaned toward John, “Your mother said you read and memorized scripture and sang hymns together. Do you remember any of them?”

“Oh, Mrs. Catlett,” demurred John, “I am a lover of music but please don’t ask me to sing!” And the family laughed. How charming Mary looked, her cheeks flushed with laughter, a wisp of hair across her cheek.

For a moment they listened to the mantle clock chime the hour, then Mrs. Catlett had another question. “I often wondered what happened when your father came back and learned that your mother had died. I mean, here is a sea captain, so often away on long trips and with a child to be responsible for.”

Looking down, John hesitated. He didn’t want to talk about this painful time. *How can I get out of this?* he thought. *Without offending Mrs. Catlett.* But when he saw the look of interest in

Mary's eyes he decided to talk.

"My father remarried and we moved to Avon. Afterwards they sent me to a boarding school in Essex. My first schoolmaster was very cruel. I wasn't a model child. . . . I did get into mischief. But the man beat me for trifles and often sent me to bed without meals. I hated him."

Mary looked distressed. "But why did you let him? Why didn't you. . . I guess you couldn't run away. . . . Oh, I'm so sorry."

Mrs. Catlett patted his arm. "You poor dear." And in the eyes of the rest of the family, he saw genuine sympathy.

THESE  
PEOPLE  
REALLY  
SEEMED  
TO CARE!

What a time John was having! Never in his life, except the first seven years when he was his mother's darling, had he experienced anything like this. At his present home he was just a step-somebody, the son of a stern father who was often away. And on board the ships he was just a crew member. But these people really seemed to care!

And John reveled in the aura and warmth of this new and reassuring experience. It took him off guard and encouraged him to say more in one afternoon than he had to any other person since his mother's death. The closed door of his heart began to swing open and the buried events of his miserable later childhood flowed out into the sunlight of this loving family.

It was time, John realized. For with his naturally retiring personality, he was becoming more and more withdrawn, more of a misanthrope, not caring for anyone, almost hating some. It was his reaction to a world he felt was unsympathetic to him. If his father

and stepmother didn't care for him, why should he care for them; in fact, why should he care for anybody? He would be for himself and to himself. . . . But now, something new was happening, at least for the moment. And his reserve melted in the warmth of this atmosphere.

He continued his story. "After those first two years under that cruel schoolmaster things finally did improve. My heartache over losing Mother eased, and I got a better schoolmaster."

As though listening to a bard, the family members leaned forward eagerly.

"Well, John," said Mrs. Catlett, "your mother prayed so much for you when she was with us, that I am sure the good Lord watched over you."

At this remark John assumed that the family must be very religious so he thought they would be pleased to hear some of the providences of God in his life.

"Yes, a number of times I was kept from either death or at least a serious accident." For some reason John glanced in the direction of Jack and saw something in his attitude which made him hesitate a moment. Was Jack skeptical about religious matters? Did his studies in law school turn him away from God? But why was he, John, disturbed by that? Didn't he have his own doubts about God?

Acutely sensitive to the negative reactions of those around him, John almost decided not to tell the story, lest he should earn Jack's scorn. But when he saw the interest of the children, he decided to proceed, directing the story to them.

"After a while my stepmother had three children and I guess

“THEY TAUGHT  
ME TO SWEAR  
AND DO OTHER  
BAD THINGS.”

she got too busy to pay much attention to me. My father was away at sea so often. I was very lonely and so found friends in the street. But they taught me to swear and do other bad things.”

“Anyway, one day when I was eleven I was riding a horse when he tripped and threw me over his head toward a newly cut hedge. I just missed being pierced by thick, sharp stakes. I could have been killed or badly hurt. I got up from my fall and said to myself, ‘God is punishing me for being bad.’ But as I thought more about it, I said to myself, ‘Maybe God is showing me His goodness by not letting me get hurt.’ I wasn’t sure which. Anyway, I stopped swearing and was a good boy.” John didn’t say, however, that his reform was very brief.

Sighing with relief at the happy ending, the children asked, “Have you any more stories about when you were a child?”

“Not exactly a child, I was about fifteen, a little younger than your sister Mary.”

“Oh,” said the boy, “Mary’s only fourteen, but she looks older.”

“Well, whatever,” John said, smiling warmly at Mary. “Some of us boys planned to go to the Thames River to see a man-o’-war at anchor, so we set the time when we would meet at the wharf the next day. My stepmother had an errand for me, so I was delayed. When I arrived a little late, I saw the boys were already in the small boat rowing towards the ship. One of them was my best friend.”

John paused a moment as he remembered. Of course, he didn’t tell how angry he had been, and how he shook his fist and cursed



the boys for going without him.

“What happened then?” the children cried.

“It was very sad. The sea was rough and as I stood on shore watching their boat bob up and down, a big wave overturned the boat. It was awful seeing them thrashing around in the waves. They all drowned. It was a terrible experience. But as I thought it over, I realized it was the hand of Providence that I was not in that boat, or I, too, would have drowned.”

“Of course it was,” broke in Mrs. Catlett, “I know God answered your mother’s prayer. She had always prayed that you would become a parson.”

John stared at her. “A parson! Did she tell you that? Well I . . . I guess Mother meant well. She was very religious.”

**“SHE HAD ALWAYS  
PRAYED THAT YOU  
WOULD BECOME  
A PARSON.”**

During the conversation, John’s eyes frequently wandered across the room toward Mary. Once their eyes met, and she turned away blushing. The girls at the sea ports didn’t blush. Mary was so sweet, so pure, so lovely. He determined that during his visit, he would spend time with her.

As the children begged for more stories, the mantle clock bonged. They had spent a good part of the afternoon with John. Mrs. Catlett jumped up. “Oh, goodness me, it’s five o’clock, and I must get dinner. Mary, light the candles and then come into the kitchen. John must be starved after his long journey.”

“John, you talk with Mr. Catlett. Jack has to study for an examination. And you children go to your rooms and don’t bother John any more asking for stories. He can tell you more later.” She