Amazing Grace in John Newton – A Christian Witness Lived and Sung

"How Sweet the Sound"

Are you familiar with the classic song *Amazing Grace*? You probably are. Do you know the inspiring story behind its songwriter? Maybe like I did, you *think* you know the real story, but you don't.

John Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and wrote hymns. "Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound)," Newton wrote, "That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."{1} He played a significant role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

Newton's song and story have inspired millions. *Amazing Grace* has been played at countless funerals and memorial services, sung at civil rights events and in churches, and even hit pop music charts when Judy Collins recorded it. It's loved the world over. In South Korea, a local audience asked a coworker and me to sing them the English version; they responded by singing it back to us in Korean.

Newton wrote the lyrics, but the tune we know today did not become linked with them until about 1835, after his death.{2} My university roommate and I used to try to see how many different tunes would fit the *Amazing Grace* lyrics. My favorites were *Joy to the World* (the Christmas carol), *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, and *House of the Rising Sun*. Try them sometime. They work!

Jonathan Aitken has written a biography titled *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*.{3} Aitken sees some parallels between his own life and his subject's. Aitken was once a prominent British parliamentarian and Cabinet member, but perjury landed him in prison where his life took a spiritual turn. He's now active in prison ministry and Christian outreach.

John Newton's journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain *after* he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

Lost and Found

Newton was the prototypical "bad boy." His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, "I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it."{4} At times, "I pretended to talk of virtue," he wrote, "yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness."{5} He espoused a "freethinking" rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.{6}

Flogged and demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became depressed, considered suicide, and thought of murdering his captain.{7} Traded to work on a slave ship, Newton says, "I was exceedingly wretched. . . . I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion."{8}

In West Africa he partnered with a slave trader and negotiated with African chiefs to obtain slaves.{9} Life was good, he recalled. "We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied."{10} Aitken, the biographer, says Newton engaged in sexual relations with female slaves.{11}

One day on another ship, Newton was reading—casually, "to pass away the time"—an edition of Thomas à Kempis' classic, *On the Imitation of Christ*. He wondered, "What if these things were true?" Dismayed, he "shut the book quickly." {12} Newton called himself a terrible "blasphemer" who had rejected God completely.{13} But then, as Forrest Gump might say, God showed up.

That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, "The Lord have mercy on us!" Spending long hours at the ship's helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, "I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him."{14}

In coming days, the New Testament story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) particularly impressed him. He became convinced of the truth of Jesus' message and his own need for it. "I was no longer an atheist," he writes. "I was sincerely touched with a sense of undeserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dangers. . . . I was a new man."{15}

Newton discovered that the "new man" would not become perfect. Maturation would be a process, as we'll see.

From Slave-Ship Captain to Pastor

After his dramatic experience at sea, Newton saw changes in his life. He attended church, read spiritual books, prayed, and spoke outwardly of his commitment. But his faith and behavior would take many twists on the road toward maturity.{16}

Newton set sail again on a slave ship, seeing no conflict between slaving and his new beliefs. Later he led three

voyages as a slave-ship captain. Newton studied the Bible. He held Sunday worship services for his crew on board ship.{17}

Church services on a slave ship? This seems absolutely disgusting today. How could a dedicated Christian participate in slave trading? Newton, like many of his contemporaries, was still a work-in-progress. Slavery was generally accepted in his world as a pillar of British economy; few yet spoke against it. As Aitken points out, this cultural disconnect doesn't excuse Christian slave trading, but it does help explain it.

During my youth in the US south, I was appalled by racism I observed, more so when church members practiced it. I concluded that some merely masqueraded as followers of Jesus. Others had genuine faith but—by choice or confusion—did not faithfully follow God. It takes years for some to change. Others never do. Aitken observes that in 1751, Newton's spiritual conscience "was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and human slavery were irreconcilable."{18}

Two days before he was to embark on his fourth slave-trading voyage as ship's captain, a mysterious illness temporarily paralyzed Newton. His doctors advised him not to sail. The replacement captain was later murdered in a shipboard slave uprising.{19}

Out of the slave trade, Newton became a prominent public official in Liverpool. He attended Christian meetings and grew in his faith. The prominent speaker George Whitfield encouraged him.{20} Life still brought temptations. Newton engaged in the common practice of accepting kickbacks until a business ethics pamphlet by Methodism founder John Wesley prompted him to stop, at significant loss of income.{21}

Eventually, Newton sought to become an ordained minister, but opposing church leaders prevented this for six years.

Intervention by the Earl of Dartmouth—benefactor of Dartmouth College in the US—helped launch his formal ministry.{22} Newton was to significantly impact a young Member of Parliament who would help rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

Newton and Wilberforce: Faith in Action

William Wilberforce was a rising star in Parliament and seemed destined for political greatness. As a child he had often heard John Newton speak but later rejected the faith. As an adult, conversations with a Cambridge professor had helped lead him to God. He considered leaving Parliament and entering the ministry. In 1785, he sought the advice of his old pastor, Newton.

Newton advised Wilberforce not to leave politics. "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing, both as a Christian and as a statesman," Newton later explained.{23} His advice proved pivotal. Wilberforce began attending Newton's church and spending time with him privately. Newton became his mentor.{24}

Perhaps you've seen the motion picture *Amazing Grace* that portrays Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. If you missed it in theaters, I encourage you see it on DVD. It was after spending a day with Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade.{25} During the arduous abolition campaign, Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel, who, Newton said, "trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him."{26}

Newton's biblical worldview had matured to the point that he

became active in the abolition movement. In 1788, he published a widely circulated pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me," he wrote, "that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."{27} His pamphlet detailed horrors of the slave trade and argued against it on moral and practical grounds.

Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament. Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.{28} Jonathan Aitken says, "Newton's testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause."{29}

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker.

Lessons from a Life of Amazing Grace

John Newton encountered "many dangers, toils, and snares" on his life's voyage from slaver to pastor, hymn writer, mentor, and abolitionist. What lessons does his life hold? Here are a few.

Moral maturation can take time. Newton the morally corrupt slave trader embraced faith in Jesus, then continued slave trading. Only years later did his moral and spiritual conscience catch up on this issue with the high principles of the One he followed. We should hold hypocrites accountable, but realize that blinders don't always come off quickly. One bumper sticker I like reads, "Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet."

Humility became a hallmark of Newton's approach to life. He

learned to recognize his shortcomings. While revising some of his letters for publication, he noted in his diary his failures to follow his own advice: "What cause have I for humiliation!" he exclaimed. "Alas! . . . How defective [I am] in observing myself the rules and cautions I propose to others!"{30} Near the end of his life, Newton told a visitor, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."{31}

Newton related Jesus' message to current events and everyday life. For him, faith was not some dull, dusty, irrelevant relic but a living relationship with God, having immense personal and social relevance. He grew to see its import in fighting the slave trade. He used both the Bible and friendship to encourage Wilberforce. He tied his teaching to the news of the day, seeking to connect people's thoughts with the beliefs that had changed his life.{32}

Newton was grateful for what he saw as God's providence. Surviving the storm at sea that helped point him to faith was a prime example, but there were many others. As a child, he was nearly impaled in a riding accident.{33} Several times he narrowly missed possible drowning.{34} A shooting accident that could have killed him merely burned part of his hat.{35} He often expressed gratitude to God.

Have you ever considered writing your own epitaph? What will it say? Here's part of what Newton wrote for his epitaph. It's inscribed on his tomb: "John Newton. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."{36}

Notes

1. From Olney Hymns, 1779; in John Newton, *Out of the Depths, "Revised and Updated for Today's Readers by Dennis R. Hillman"*

(Grand Rapids: Kregel 2003), 9. Newton's autobiography was originally published in 1764 as *An Authentic Narrative*, a collection of letters between an anonymous writer (Newton) and a pastor. Newton was not yet ordained when he wrote the letters.

2. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 233.

3. Aitken, op. cit.

4. Newton, op. cit., 24.

5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid., 34.

7. Ibid., 34-37; 40-41.

8. Ibid., 44-45.

9. Ibid., 57-64; Aitken, op. cit., 63-64.

10. Newton, op. cit., 60.

11. Aitken, op. cit., 64.

12. Newton, op. cit., 69.

13. Ibid., 65, 68.

14. Ibid., 69-80; quotations from 71, 75.

15. Newton, op. cit., 82-83.

16. Aitken, op. cit., 85 ff.

17. Ibid., 91, ff.; 106, 107.

18. Ibid., 112.

19. Ibid., 125-126.

20. Ibid., 127-137.

21. Ibid., 140-141.

22. Ibid., 143-177; 193.

23. Ibid., 304.

24. Ibid., 299-308.

25. Ibid., 310 ff.

26. Ibid., 315 for the quote about Daniel; 312-316 for background on Wilberforce's thoughts about quitting.

27. Ibid., 319.

28. Ibid., 319-328.

29. Ibid., 319.

30. Ibid., 243.

31. Ibid., 347.

32. Ibid., 293-296. See also Newton, op. cit., 154.

33. Newton, op. cit., 23.

34. Ibid., 23, 66-67, 94-95.

35. Ibid., 85.

36. Aitken, op. cit., 350, 356.

© 2008 Probe Ministries

Breaching the Barriers of Islam: Sharing Christ with Muslims

Steve Cable writes that Christ-followers can use some intriguing verses in the Koran as a way to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to Muslims.

Barriers to Islamic Evangelism

Even in these tense times, we can be confident that God loves the followers of Islam and desires for them to receive redemption through Jesus Christ. Paul writes in First Timothy, "[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:3). However, many Christians feel like the gulf is too wide and the walls are too high to share the truth with Muslims. Yet, our God is a "rewarder of those who seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6), working in providential ways to make truth known.

In this article, we will discuss one way God is breaching the barriers of Islam. Let's begin by looking at the very real barriers to Islamic evangelism.

The first decade of the twenty-first century is becoming known for the greatest clash between the Western world and Islam since the Crusades. The recent furor over cartoons showing caricatures of Mohammed is a violent example of the chasm. This radical fanaticism is an extreme expression of the barriers that have existed for centuries as Christians have tried to share their faith with followers of Islam. Around the globe, missionaries have typically seen fewer converts from Islam than from other religions. Let's consider a few of the bricks from which this barrier is constructed:

- *The higher way syndrome—According to Islam, earlier*

prophets such as Moses and Jesus brought truth from God, but over time their followers corrupted God's true intent. Mohammed came to correct those perversions. Therefore, the Bible has been corrupted and is no longer reliable

• The final word—Mohammed is the last of the prophets; there can be no further revelation. Questioning the meaning of the Koran as held by the local Imam is strictly prohibited

• The greater reward—Zeal and strict adherence to the tenets of Islam will result in great rewards in paradise. A zealous Muslim will be proselytizing others, not allowing someone to try to convert him.

These first three bricks share much in common with reasons why it should be hard to convert a devout Christian to another world religion. But Islam adds a fourth brick that is distinctly different:

• The ultimate penalty—As reported by Ibn Warraq, "It is quite clear that under Islamic law, an apostate must be put to death. . . . If [even] a pubescent boy apostatizes, he is imprisoned until he comes of age, when if he persists in rejecting Islam, he must be put to death."{1} The death penalty for conversion certainly puts a damper on openness to considering the claims of other religions.

These bricks and others build a solid fortress making it difficult for evangelism among Muslims.

Once More into the Breach

Even though certain aspects of Islam create a formidable wall for those desiring to share Christ, God has equipped us for "the destruction of fortresses . . . and every lofty thing

raised up against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor. 10:4). As David Garrison reports, "More Muslims have come to Christ in the past two decades than at any other time in history.{2}"

Before modern artillery, a high, thick wall was an effective fortress. If the fortress was well supplied or time was a critical factor for the attacking army, a breach had to be created in the wall through artillery or siege works. The first group of troops to enter the breach would take on the brunt of the fortress's defenses and suffer extremely heavy casualties. During the Napoleonic wars, the British army called the first attackers the Forlorn Hope, offering promotions to any survivors. Shakespeare honored the Forlorn Hope in "King Henry V" as Henry rallied his troops shouting "*once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more, or close the wall up with our English dead*!"{3}

Is it possible that a Forlorn Hope entering a God-given breach in the barriers of Islam could spread the light of the gospel in an Islamic country?

In a South Asian country, Abdul, a teenager, was expelled from his Islamic school for asking too many questions about the Koran. Because of Islamic law, he was held as a captive by his family and condemned to death upon coming of age. Secretly freed by his mother, he fled from his home. A chance encounter with a Christian missionary as he walked a country road dramatically changed his life. The missionary showed such love and concern that Abdul had to touch him to assure himself that this was a man and not an angel. Abdul gave his life to Christ and was baptized. Abdul was one of a handful of converts from Islam witnessed by this missionary over a period of thirty years.

Banished from his home, Abdul spent several years studying and growing in his faith in another part of the country. Led by God to return to his village, Abdul took up residence in the home of a childhood friend as he was still banished by his

family. After a few months of studying the Koran and the Bible, his friend was ready to be baptized. When his family learned about it, they rounded up the villagers, took Abdul to the local soccer field and proceeded to beat him. Left for dead, his friend came to his aid and Abdul survived. When Abdul baptized his friend, he prayed "Thank you, God for my friend. Yesterday, I was the only believer in this village. Today there are two. Tomorrow, there can be two hundred if it is your will."

Within a few years, all 1,800 people in Abdul's village became Christians including those who left him for dead. These new believers were discipled and more villages were touched. Since that time, over 500,000 Muslim background believers have joined in following Jesus Christ. This unprecedented response also resulted in the murder of Abdul's friend by Islamic radicals. Their willingness to act as the Forlorn Hope, entering the breach with no regard for their own lives, was a central part of this wonderful awakening.

The Breach in the Barrier

What was the breach in the fortress of Islam allowing the message of Christ to be heard? Remember Abdul used the Koran and the Bible to bring his friend to faith. The breach in the barrier is the Koran itself. According to others working in Abdul's country, "Good Muslims have been taught from childhood that the Koran is the only true word of God. They may not know the meaning of the Koran's text, but nonetheless, they believe it is true. When approached with the Bible, Muslims immediately become defensive, but they cannot and will not deny the Koran. Relating to a Muslim from the Koran guarantees a listening ear."{4}

Many Muslims do not know that the following assertions appear in the Koran:

- If you are in doubt about the truth, ask those who read the Scripture that came before you.{5}
- To be a proper Muslim, one must read the Before Books (the Old and New Testaments).{6}
- Christians are humble and compassionate and know the truth when they hear it.{7}
- Those who observe the teaching of the Torah and the Gospels will go to heaven.{8}
- Mohammed states he is not the greatest prophet, he does not know what will happen to his followers (after death) and he is only a Warner.{9}
- Jesus knows the way to Allah.{10}

The strongest passage to foster a discussion about Jesus is Surah Al-Imran 3:42-55. This passage states:

- Mary was chosen by God,
- Jesus was born of a virgin,
- Jesus is the Messiah,
- Jesus has power over death, and
- Jesus knows the way to heaven.

An honest, open reading raises "Jesus from 'Prophet' status closer to 'Savior' status."{11} For example verse 3:45 reads, "O Maryam! Allah gives you the good news . . . that you will be given a son; his name will be Messiah, Isa the son of Maryam."{12} And 3:49 reads, "[Jesus] will heal the blind and the lepers, and raise the dead to life, by Allah's leave."{13} This passage clearly ascribes to Jesus a position and power that Mohammed does not ascribe to himself.

Don't Misuse the Koran

We rightfully accuse some cults of using proof texts from the Bible to promote distorted religions. Do the verses introduced above relate the overwhelming message of the Koran? Absolutely not. There are other passages which are critical of Christianity and particularly the idea that Jesus is "another

God" apart from Allah. Lest we be guilty of "proof-texting," someone approaching a Muslim with passages from the Koran must be clear on their objective. We should keep in mind four points:

> • *Be humble. Freely admit that you are not an expert in the Koran. You want to understand how they view these passages.*
>
> • *Be simple. Do not expound on the doctrine of the Koran or attribute inspiration to its teaching. Simply point out that the Koran seems to encourage Muslims to study our Bible and understand more about Jesus.*
>
> • *Be sensitive. Don't think that you are going to use the Koran to lead someone to Christ. You are discussing the Koran to see if they are open to further exploration of Jesus' teaching.*
>
> • *Be positive. People who have grown up studying the Koran have used this approach to bring hundreds of thousands of Muslims to faith in Christ over the last decade.*

In his book *Camel Training Manual*, Kevin Greeson points out that Paul's custom when entering a new area was to begin teaching Christ in the synagogue from their Scripture, the Old Testament. In a similar fashion, we can approach a Muslim with the question, "I have discovered an amazing truth in the Koran that gives hope of eternal life in heaven. Would you read this passage with me so that we can talk about it?"{14}

The purpose of this discussion is not to show how much you know about the Koran or how little they may know. In humility, the purpose is to ask them to consider the implications of this passage stating Jesus had authority over death and Jesus knows the way to heaven. They know these statements are true because they are in the Koran. If they are concerned about

death and want to know the way to heaven, they may want to learn more about Jesus to follow the Koran's injunction to obey Jesus.

This teaching about Jesus is especially important in the light of Surah The Chambers 46:9 which reads, "I [Mohammed] am no prodigy among the prophets; nor do I know what will be done with me or with you. I follow only what is revealed to me, and I am no more than a plain Warner." So, the Koran teaches Mohammed is a warner (calling people to fully obey God) while Jesus is the Messiah (knowing the way to God). A serious Muslim should have a desire to learn about Jesus.

A Person of Peace

Please note that the purpose of discussing the Koran is not to teach someone how to receive God's free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. The purpose is to identify people who are open to learning more about Jesus. People whose hearts are prepared through diligently seeking to know God. In his book *Church Planting Movements*, Kevin Greeson refers to this as "finding a Person of Peace."

This term refers to Jesus sending seventy of the disciples ahead of Him to witness in every city and place where He was going. Jesus commanded the seventy, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you" (Luke 10:5-7). Jesus was telling them to use a non-threatening, culturally appropriate way to determine whether a person is open to learning more about Jesus. An open, interested person is a "person of peace" and you should invest your time in them. If they are not interested, then shake the dust from your feet and move on. It will only antagonize them and their community if you insist on forcing yourself upon them. Once an interest in knowing more about Jesus is confirmed, you set the Koran aside and turn to the Bible (the

"Before Book" in Koran terminology) to teach them about Jesus and redemption.

One concern about sharing in this manner is the danger of producing a group of pseudo-believers who add a distorted view of Christ to their religious practice without truly putting their faith in Christ. This danger is why the Koran must be viewed only as the breach getting you into the fortress. The Bible in the power of the Holy Spirit supplies the words that lead to salvation. Discipleship must be strictly based on the Bible.

In addition to the large numbers of conversions in Abdul's country, the level of commitment by these new believers is encouraging. In 2002, a team from a U.S. mission organization conducted an investigation of the churches resulting from this movement. They found that

- over 2/3 of the new converts had been active followers of Islam,
- less than 25% were mingling old Islamic beliefs with their new Christian ones, and
- less than 10% of the people know of any Christian returning to Islam.{15}

When Jesus told his followers to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19-20), He did not add a caveat excluding those hostile cultures with strong barriers to the truth. Instead, He promised to be with us and equip us with divinely powerful weapons to breach those fortresses. Hopefully, you are encouraged to reach out in love to Muslims as God brings them into your life. To learn more, take a look at the *Camel Training Manual* from WIGTake Resources.{16}

Notes

1. Ibn Warraq, "Apostasy and Human Rights", *Free Inquiry,* February/March 2006, vol 26 No. 2.
2. *Church Planting Movements, How God Is Redeeming a Lost*

World, David Garrison, WIFTake Resources, 2004.
3. *King Henry V*, William Shakespeare.
4. Kevin Greeson, *Camel Training Manual* (Midlothian: WIGTake Resources, 2004).
5. Koran Surah Jonah 10:94.
6. Koran Surah The Woman 4:136.
7. Koran Surah The Table Spread 5:82-83.
8. Koran Surah The Table Spread 5:65-66.
9. Koran Surah The Sandhills 46:9.
10. Koran Surah Al-Imran 3:42-55.
11. Greeson.
12. English translation of Muhammad Farooq-i-Azam Malik, *Al-Qur'an, The Guidance for Mankind* (Institute of Islamic Knowledge, 1997).
13. Ibid.
14. Greeson.
15. Garrison.
16. Available online at the Church Planting Movement's Web site at www.churchplantingmovements.com/camel_training_manual.htm.

© 2006 Probe Ministries