

Amazing Grace
(Rev. Dr. John Bartol)

“Remember that you were a slave and the Lord your God redeemed you.”
(Deut.15:15).

In recent years the hymn Amazing Grace has become a special favourite among Canadians. But the story about its author is equally amazing. John Newton was born in England in 1725. His mother was a devoted Christian, but she died when John was only seven, leaving him grief stricken and at the mercy of a rough world. And yet, in a very real sense his mother’s prayers followed him, even though he drifted far from God.

At age 11 he signed on as a crew member of a ship connected with the slave trade. John said, “I went to Africa that I might be free to sin to my hearts content.” He began to drink heavily, got involved in frequent fights, and also in the unspeakable atrocities of the African slave trade. He actually became a slave himself.

Later, when he wrote the story of his life, he confessed that he had a very treacherous memory. God spoke to him in many different ways, and under unusual circumstances, warning him about the path he was following; but over and over he forgot.

As a boy he was thrown from a horse and nearly killed. He made a promise to a girl he loved but he broke that promise. He was sick with a terrible fever and it seemed that he would die. He had a remarkable dream that made a deep impression on him, but it soon wore off. The spirit of God pleaded with him to repent, but over and over, in the story of his life, we read the words – I forgot! I forgot!

Once, during a drunken spree he made the proud boast that he was here on earth for the express purpose of serving the devil. In fact, he was nicknamed, the Devil’s Angel. It seemed incredible that any man would sink so low.

One night, Newton and his ship mates faced the worst storm they had ever experienced. With 30-foot waves crashing over their deck it seemed inevitable that the ship would sink, and all be lost. Newton saw this as a sign from God. He, along with others cried out to God for mercy. He came to the end of himself and prayed, “O God how can you love me so much as to spare me? I’ve been so wicked, God forgive me!” He was then 23.

From that time on he never forgot how the Lord reached down and saved him from a life of sin and shame He wrote a number of great hymns of which Amazing Grace is the best known. For almost 30 years he was a faithful

preacher of the gospel and he joined ranks with William Wilberforce in the great effort to abolish slavery. He composed his own epitaph:

. JOHN NEWTON

Once an Infidel and Libertine,
A Servant of Slaves in Africa
Was by the Mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
Preserved, Restored, Pardoned,
and Appointed to Preach the Faith he
had so long laboured to destroy

What the Lord did for John Newton, He can do for anyone of us. Near the close of his earthly pilgrimage he told a friend, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Saviour!