

# Amazing Grace

## A Journey in Time and Faith

David Douglas

On a mid-December afternoon I arrive in Olney, drawn to the English village by a hymn. Following High Street past the Market Place ablaze in Christmas decorations, I reach the parish church where John Newton once served as pastor.

The former captain of slaveships wrote hundreds of hymns from this landlocked town 60 miles north of London, his verses published along with those of his friend, the poet William Cowper, as *Olney Hymns* in 1779. From this quiet corner of Britain emerged many of the resounding hymns in Christendom, among them FAITH'S REVIEW AND EXPECTATION, better known as "Amazing Grace":

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.

The hymn reflects precisely the life of the ex-slaver and Anglican curate who wrote it. John Newton had no mere vicarious acquaintance with gravity and grace. At Olney he penned his spiritual autobiography in six verses.

At the southeast wall of the churchyard, I find Newton's grave, its granite tomb incongruously imposing compared with the curate's self-effacing epitaph on its side:

John Newton, Clerk,  
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

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He had long laboured to destroy.  
Near sixteen years at Olney...

*John Newton's grave,  
Olney, England.*

In prose and verse Newton proved a keen-eyed chronicler of youth's wasted hours. Having trafficked in both slaves and sins of the flesh, he had indulged in "the most abandoned scenes of profligacy." Like a doctor self-diagnosing a tumor, Newton pinpointed the source of his behavior as rebellion against God. On the eve of what would be his most eventful voyage between Africa and England, Newton wrote:

My whole life, when awake, was a course of the most horrid impiety and profaneness. I know not that I have ever since met so daring a blasphemer. Not content with common oaths and imprecations, I daily invented new ones.

A stiff wind sweeps over Olney's churchyard, and winter light slants against the tomb's ironic letters: "...appointed to preach the Faith he had long laboured to destroy." Newton matched this confession in stone with an even more enduring one in song.

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Few parts of England lie further from the ocean than Olney. Newton wrote of amazing grace from this inland village, but he first experienced it on the high seas off Newfoundland. On board the *Greyhound* (a ship carrying not slaves but African beeswax, gold, and ivory to England) in March, 1748, he chanced upon Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* in the captain's library, with its account of life's brevity and God's expectations. The following night a storm upended the North Atlantic and, as the 22-year-old Newton struggled at the wheel, he found an unaccustomed prayer for mercy on his lips—"the first desire I had breathed for mercy for the space of many years."

The storm shattered not only the ship but Newton's old self. Grappling with the vessel's wheel, pummeled with fear, the seaman could have echoed John Donne's cry: "Batter my heart, three-person'd God."

The *Greyhound* survived, but it drifted for four weeks, reaching Ireland's coast only as "the very last victuals was boiling on the pot." Hours after landing the wind shifted so fiercely his ship would have sunk had it still been at sea.

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

John Newton may be one of Olney's most famous sons, but few people I meet have him on their minds in the busy Christmas season. The local bookstore carries no titles about him. No monument rises to him in Market Place's triangular green.

I attend the parish church of St. Peter and St. Paul's morning prayer service, its doors unlocked at the last minute by a fast-peddling bicyclist, a middle-aged woman who introduces herself as a deacon and morning reader. We take our places in the north aisle, the only two worshipers this Saturday morning. Facing each other with prayer books in hand, we follow the liturgy, gradually overcoming our antiphonal awkwardness.

She takes time after the service to point out one of the few reminders of John Newton in the church—a stained-glass window depicting the curate in clerical garb flanked by a slaveship. Some contemporary singers of AMAZING GRACE have assumed that Newton's conversion immediately triggered a renunciation of slaving, but he continued for six years, only with time grasping its horror and eventually helping to galvanize William Wilberforce and the British antislavery movement.

Newton would not become an Anglican priest until ten years after the *Greyhound's* voyage, and only slowly did this man of the sea concede fully that he was not captain of his

soul. Conversion for Newton, as for most travelers, proved less an incident than a journey. But having once caught a glimpse of grace from a tossing ship, Newton kept it in view like the polar star.

In shadows at the back of the church, I find his old pulpit. When it came to pastoral visitation, Newton fed his congregation of largely poor lacemakers with deep compassion, but he apparently lacked a talent for preaching. "His utterances," recalled one parishioner, "were far from clear and his attitude ungraceful."

Newton served for 16 years here at Olney on the river Ouse, then for 27 more years at London's St. Mary Woolnoth where he and his wife, Mary, moved for their second pastorate. When a friend urged rest near the end of his life, Newton replied: "I cannot stop. What, shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?"

If he rarely seemed at a loss for words, it was not so at first. After giving only six sermons, Newton "felt he had run through his whole stock," notes biographer Brian Edwards in *Through Many Dangers*. "He wandered out of the churchyard and down to the Ouse; there he watched the river on its long journey to the sea. 'How long has this river run?' he thought. 'Many hundreds of years, and so it will continue. Is not the fund for my sermons equally inexhaustible—the Word of God?'"

One of the haunting images in Norman Maclean's novel *A River Runs Through It* suggests that we often lack power to save those closest to us from self-destructive choices. But an even deeper truth echoes down the centuries, spoken stubbornly if inelegantly by preachers like Newton: not merely that we cannot save others, but that we cannot save even ourselves.

The rural countryside surrounding Olney unveils no stunning scenery. "It's all rather flat, really," sighs a tourist official from a neighboring town. Yet from this level landscape have risen two monumental volumes in spiritual history: *The Pilgrim's Progress*, written by John Bunyan in Bedford, a dozen miles east of Olney, and *Olney Hymns*, published in 1779 by Newton and his friend, the poet William Cowper. Written on the far side of Newton's raw youth and in the throes of Cowper's recurrent melancholy, the 348 hymns were intended for the congregation's mid-week prayer services and included Newton's "Glorious things of Thee are spoken," "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds," and Cowper's "Sometimes a light surprises," "God moves in a mysterious way," and "O for a closer walk with God."

Olney lies off most tourist tracks and pilgrimage maps, yet this ordinary English village spawned a legacy of hymnody matched by few places in Christendom. As Cowper himself reminded singers, any locale—whether obscure or breathtaking—can bring us closer to God; what saves us, after all, is not a place but a person:

Jesus where'er Thy people meet,  
There they behold Thy mercy seat,  
Where'er they seek Thee, Thou art found,  
And every place is hallowed ground.

A few blocks from the church, William Cowper's red-brick home now operates as the Cowper and Newton Museum. With serene gardens and Cowper's summer house for writing verse, most of the museum is given over to the famous poet's memorabilia and an exhibit of Olney's cottage industry of lacemaking. Newton's name seems rather an afterthought, with a single room displaying his books, chair, and clerical bands.

Fortunately the museum does sell several hard-to-find books related to Olney's curate, including *Cardiphonia*, a collection of his letters to correspondents on spiritual matters. Called "the letter writer *par excellence* of the Evangelical Revival," Newton himself ventured, "It is the Lord's will that I should do most by my letters."

If Newton's preaching lacked flair, his epistles testify incisively to divine grace that lifts, restores, and unites. Newton's letters and hymns together collect like stones of a cairn, piled high along a precipitous trail to orient others.

Not long ago a beloved Scottish doctor on his deathbed forbade any eulogy at his funeral. When asked why, he explained: "I've gone to too many funerals where the deceased was hailed as so wonderful that it sounded as if he had no need of a Savior."

Like the Scottish doctor, John Newton made certain in each lyric and letter that no one would make that mistake about him.

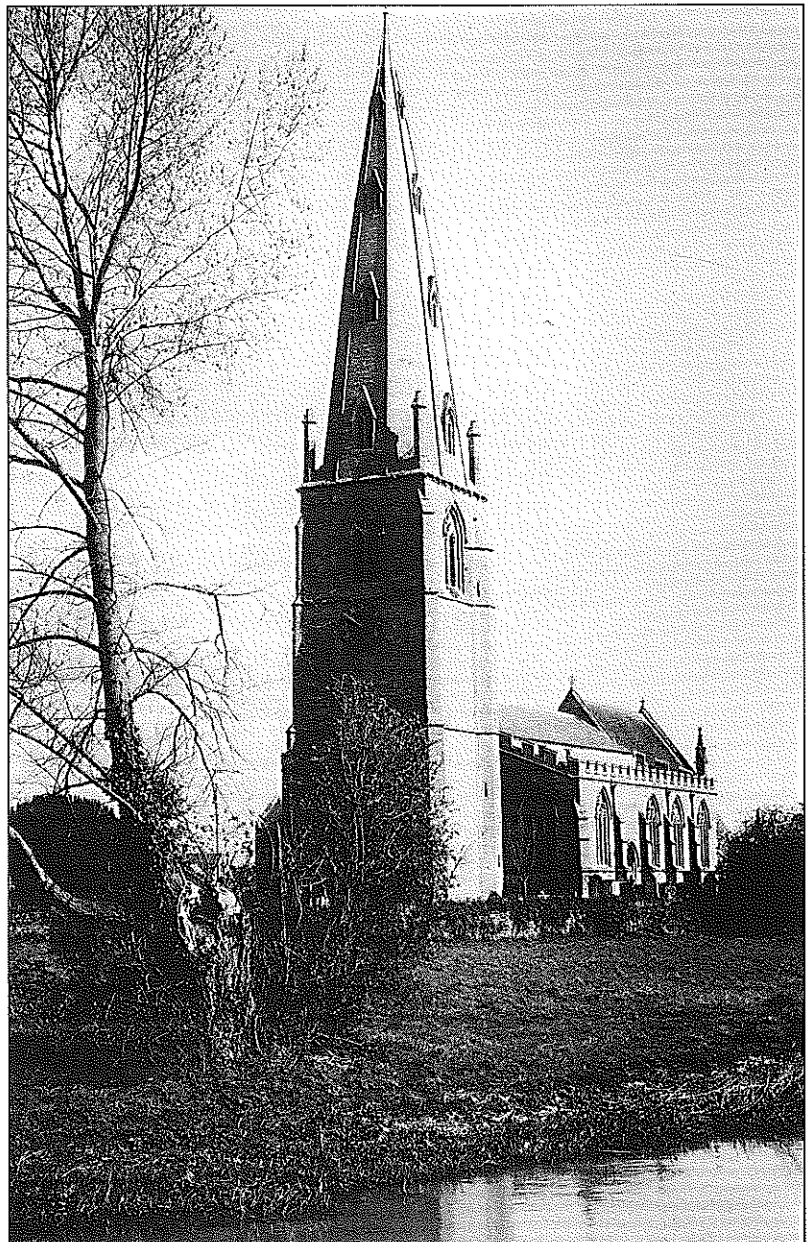
The tune now associated with "Amazing Grace" came not from Newton's pen but from America, the folk melody *NEW BRITAIN*, first linked with his text in 1835 in William Walker's *Southern Harmony*. The hymn thus spans the Atlantic, linking Old and New World, as resonant on fiddle as on bagpipe.

"Yet 'Amazing Grace' is not nearly as popular here in England as in the US," observes one Anglican priest, adding, "I suspect it has to do with our national heresy—Pelagianism—the sense that we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Yanks across the Pond tend to be

more realistic. Bootstraps are not enough."

At times "Amazing Grace" has acted like a bridge, allowing singers to cross over to an expression of repentance they otherwise would not care to utter. The author and retreat leader Evelyn Underhill once noted that her spiritual insights occasionally ran ahead of her actual experience: "I arrive several years later at the experience of the things I said." With "Amazing Grace" we can find ourselves arriving several years later at the experience of the things we have sung.

Olney, England



When I was 22 years old, and a disbeliever in Christianity, I worked for a year in Appalachia as both a teacher and a leader of a church youth group. One midwinter night I'd been asked to entertain a large gathering of coal-miners and their families with my guitar and folk songs. To end, I'd chosen "Amazing Grace." This was before Judy Collins or the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards had popularized the hymn, and I'd come to know it only that year in the mountains of West Virginia. Midway through the second verse, I forgot the lyrics. The audience, raised as they had been on the hymn, filled in, singing even louder, until I recovered the words and we finished in unison. The incident turned out to be a metaphor for that year in Appalachia, a time of turning slowly to Christ: I stood before others to lead them in singing and ended by being taught the song.

In the years after I left Appalachia, I continued to sing "Amazing Grace," often with a classmate from law school. Our voices stretched out verses like taffy, as my friend's Baptist upbringing elongated the comfort of salvation. After our marriages, our wives joined in, and the four of us would end evenings together singing it *a capella*—a Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, and Episcopalian—all brought together around the fire of "Amazing Grace."

My daughters were exposed early to the hymn (our three-year-old asking to hear "Mary Grace" as though it were a nursery tune about yet another "Mary"). I would wince, however, when my young—and to a father, forever innocent—daughters would sing "that saved a wretch like me," the tone discordant in such tender lives.

Old age does not prevent an eighty-year-old friend from loathing the hymn for language she considers self-abasing. Some hymnals substitute "soul" for "wretch" while other writers have tried to revise the verse, one venturing in dubious theology and syntax:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
that shone a jewel like me.

Yet the words as first drafted in Olney ring true: we are indeed a people who have slipped far from God. But the point is God's forgiveness, not our fallenness. We rise to sing "Amazing Grace" not "Amazing Sin."

In Olney, John Newton is no more. Only a tomb and a few dusty mementos survive. Olney offers a sharp rebuke to the presumption of earthly immortality: he is not here, he has risen.

I don't doubt that Newton would approve of time having eclipsed his name. It is more than enough to have bequeathed such words as "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound" that rise without protest to our voices, so that in singing we remember less the composer than the author of grace itself.

A few weeks before he died on December 21, 1807, John Newton remarked to a visitor, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great saviour."

The ship on the high seas has stopped tossing. The storm is over. And we find ourselves anchored in the fathomless mercy of God. ■