

**Sermon Notes**  
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**25<sup>th</sup> February 2007, St John's Church Yeovil**

**1 Chronicles 17:1-17; John Newton focus**

This year is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Newton's death, and also the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. And today there is a big service honouring John Newton at York Minster. Newton was a slave trader who then became an influential figure in the movement to abolish slavery, mainly because of his close connections with William Wilberforce, the politician who championed the cause in Parliament, and after 20 years of trying finally gained sufficient support for abolition to become Law. These two men and others with them became convinced that their cause was not only right as a humanitarian action, but was also something which Christian faith demanded; they were driven to change the world by their evangelical Christian convictions.

You can find all sorts of interesting things on a website called [johnnewton.org](http://johnnewton.org), which is where our earlier presentation came from, there are various biographies around, and there is a book new for this year called 365 days with Newton, which is a fascinating and marvellous devotional book using extracts from his sermons and hymns together with Bible readings. Available from Keith Jones at £12. Very much recommended.

Amazing Grace was almost certainly written to accompany a sermon Newton preached on New Year's Day 1773, and he titled the hymn Faith's review and expectation. In other words, it is about looking back to what God has done for us (saved a wretch like me), and looking on to what he is going to do for us (grace will lead me home). The Bible passage on which he preached that morning was our OT reading, from 1 Chronicles 17.

King David is well established as King of Israel at this time. He has taken over from Saul, he has extended the borders of the Land, he has conquered Jerusalem to be his capital city, he has restored the Ark of the Covenant to its rightful place, and now in chapter 17 he decides for the best of reasons to build a temple, a house for God. READ v. 1. But that night the word of the Lord came to the prophet Nathan. First God reviews his goodness to David in the past: READ 7-8a. Then God makes promises for the future, saying that David should not build a house for God; instead God was going to build a house, or rather a dynasty, for David, promising to set his descendants on his throne for ever. READ 10b-14. This is a prophecy concerning David's son Solomon, but it points us forward to David's greater Son, Jesus Christ who is the true King over every Kingdom and whose throne is established for ever and ever.

Already we see faith's review of the past and faith's expectation for the future. But Newton chooses to focus especially in his sermon on David's prayer of response, which begins like this in verse 16: READ 16-17. Newton wrote, 'Few living can have more cause than myself to say, Who am I? that thou hast brought me this far? Brought me from Africa, from the house of bondage, saved me from sinking in the ocean and from 1000 deaths – raised me from a state of contempt and misery beyond the common lot of mortals – to admit me among thy children, thy servants, to know and to preach the gospel – and this in a situation of honour and eminence. I am surrounded with mercies and comforts. Thy goodness has followed and encompassed me through another year. May my heart praise thee. May my life praise thee.

He was clearly very struck by King David's astonishment at being God's man, and echoed that astonishment always in his own heart – who am I? Why should you choose to save me? To use me? And it's one of the things I love about John Newton that he never ceased to be amazed at God's amazing grace, God's amazing kindness and mercy to a rebel and a sinner. What about us? Lent gives us a good opportunity to bring those thoughts to our own minds also: set aside all thoughts of what you have done for God, and fill your mind with what God has done for you. Such thinking gives us a much better view of ourselves, and a much better view of God.

In the eyes of God, it is not only the blaspheming slave-trader who is a sinner. We all count under that description. To sin is not so much to do wrong things, as to be wrongly orientated in our lives. If God is not your number one thought, your number one priority, your whole life's orientation, then you are not giving God the place he deserves. And that is surely true of all of us. So it is that the New Testament declares that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

For the Christian then, looking back is to see how amazing it is that God has acted to save sinners like us. Whether our past be spectacularly wrong like Newton's, or just typically self-centred and frankly pretty normal like most of us, we should still be amazed by the grace of God to us. He sees us in our sin, loves us in spite of it, acted through the death of Christ to save us, and brought us to newness of life by his Spirit. Every Christian should echo King David's words, 'Who am I that you have brought me this far?'

That is faith's review of the past. And faith's expectation for the future follows. King David continues in his prayer, verse 17:READ. God makes no promise for our future health, wealth or happiness in this life, but tremendous promises for our future in the next one, if we have put our trust in Christ. Newton's sermon speaks of the joy to which we are hastening: 'O that crown, that kingdom, that eternal weight of glory! We are travelling home to God. We shall soon see Jesus and never complain of sin, sorrow, temptation or desertion any more. He has dealt with us according the estate of a man of high degree. He found us upon the dunghill and has made us companions of princes – he found us in a wilderness and has led us to the city of God.

Newton applies this looking forward in two ways. First he says to the congregation before him, 'But some of you, I fear, are strangers to the promises.' So he urges them to faith in Christ's promise of future glory: O God, says David, you have spoken about the future – and we must believe him. Second, Newton calls for patience in those who believe: heaven and its glories are to come, but for now there is trouble and we must have patience to cope with life's trials, and trust that God is working his purpose out for our good – grace shall lead us home.

Great disciplines for Lent, then, to look back in humility and gratitude and wonder, and to look forward in faith and with patience. Let these be marks of your praying in these weeks to come. God took a foul-living, foul-mouthed slave-trader, and transformed him into someone he could use – and whose words still inspire many two centuries on. He saw his life mirrored also in the story of Zacchaeus – the thieving tax-collector who met with Jesus and whose life was changed for ever. His sermon on that passage concludes like this: When God saves, he saves completely, he removes the curse, restores access and power with God, renews the divine image upon the soul, and thus reclaims the rebel and teaches him to reverence, love and serve the God of his life.

The Lord is now seeking. O may you be willing to be found of him, or else you are lost for ever. And let those whom he has redeemed out of the hand of the enemy, praise and magnify his name and renew their engagements in his strength to serve him and walk before him in holy obedience all their days.

(So here are the last three verses of ~Amazing Grace, as Newton wrote them:

The Lord has promised good to me, His Word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures.

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail, and mortal life shall cease;  
I shall possess within the veil a life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow, The sun forbear to shine;  
But God who called me here below will be forever mine.)