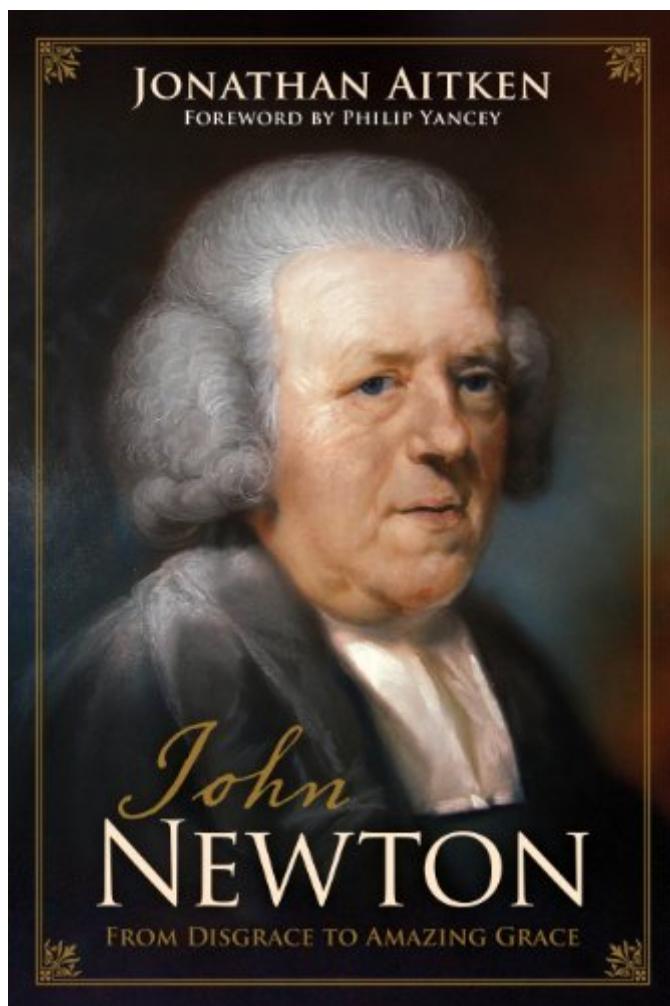


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John Newton (Foreword By Philip Yancey): From Disgrace To Amazing Grace



Synopsis

Most Christians know John Newton as a man who once captained a slave ship, was dramatically converted to Christ on the high seas, and later penned one of the greatest hymns of the faith, "Amazing Grace." But he also had a huge impact on his times as an icon of the evangelical movement, as a great preacher and theologian, and as a seminal influence on abolitionist William Wilberforce. Newton's friendship with Wilberforce is portrayed in the major motion picture Amazing Grace. Jonathan Aitken's new biography John Newton explores all these facets of Newton's life and character. It is the first biography to draw on Newton's unpublished diaries and correspondence, providing fresh insight into the life of this complex and memorable Christian. The result is a fascinating, colorful, and historically significant portrait of John Newton, a self-described "great sinner" redeemed by a great Savior through amazing grace.

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Customer Reviews

Many people have likely heard of John Newton either as the author of "Amazing Grace", or by the William Wilberforce biopic of the same name. Jonathan Aitken's biography of Newton, however, reveals a Christian life with an influence far beyond hymns or his association with the abolition movement. This is a story of redemption and ministry as much as it is anything. Newton's early dissolute life is well-covered in this book: a troubled childhood, a quick mind given over to blasphemy and atheism in his wild youth, and his dark years as both slave and slave trader. Newton's conversion (and many narrow escapes) is well-documented, and his turning to God is portrayed as the agonizing, deep process it was--there are no sudden changes here, but continual pitfalls and setbacks in a man who slowly turned into a great warrior for the Lord. For those with a calling to the ministry, Newton's struggles with ordination and his following career as a pastor will be of great interest. Newton was innovative, lively, inclusive, and gospel-centered as a pastor. It is not to say that his ministry did not have great struggles and stumbles, but his attitude and perseverance will likely inspire readers. Some of the machinations and historical aspects of the society in Newton's time will be of great interest to lovers of history. The aspects dealing with abolition and the writing of "Amazing Grace" might seem brief to some readers expecting to find those items front-and-center, but honestly, John Newton's life is exemplary for his larger-than-life conversion story and preaching as much as it is for his more well-known accomplishments. Aitken's book starts a bit slow, but finds a livelier rhythm when it comes to Newton's ordination and subsequent ministry. The depth of the book is quite excellent, with many of Newton's correspondences and diaries mined for context and to show just how committed Newton became in the service of Christ. This is a book worth sticking with, as readers will be rewarded with an insight into a man who was one of the great redemption stories in his generation, and many generations to come.

John Newton was incredible (*incredible*), and Jonathan Aitken does an admirable job recounting his life. An impressed Navy sailor; a deserter; a slave ship captain; a new Christian struggling to cast-off his immoral habits; a more mature Christian struggling to find his calling; a small-town pastor impacting his nation; a big-city pastor impacting his government and the world; a hymn-writer; a best-selling author; a loving, tender husband; a networker (in the best sense of the word); a man committed to prayer and reflection; an adoptive father ... he lived a remarkable life. Escaping near death multiple times in his early years, he lived a long, faithful life and - in the end - he wasn't afraid of dying (nor of his wife's death) because he knew the one who would welcome him home.

While not everyone knows the name of John Newton, everyone knows his song and at least a bit of his story. Immortalized in the words of "Amazing Grace," the most-recorded song in history, everyone knows that John Newton was wretched and miserable until saved by a grace that forever transformed his life. Two centuries ago, fewer people knew his song, but far more knew his story. That story is told again and told afresh in Jonathan Aitken's new biography John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace. John Newton lived a life that could only have been more dramatic if it were the product of fiction. Forced into naval service when he was young, Newton endeared himself to no one, living a life of utter disregard for authority. While attempting to desert he was captured and dropped to the lowest ranks of seamen. He eventually found a way to be released from the military and wormed his way onto a slave ship with which he sailed down the long coast of Africa. Being deserted for a time on that dark continent, he was made the slave of a slave-trader and suffered terrible abuse at the hands of his captor. After a time he was rescued and became the captain of his own slave ship. But then, during a long passage across the Atlantic Ocean, he began to read a Bible and underwent the remarkable transformation chronicled in the song he wrote years later. Newton worked in secular employment for a time but soon felt the call to ministry and was ordained an Anglican priest, a position he retained until his death in 1807. In the intervening years he became widely-known through his biography and through his efforts to abolish the slave trade. He served as mentor to William Wilberforce who fought a long but ultimately successful campaign to ban the British slave trade. It was two hundred years ago that this battle was won and two hundred years ago that Newton died. As Eric Metaxas has written a new biography of Wilberforce to mark the occasion, Aitken has done the same with Newton. And it is quite a good biography. Aitken, who has previously chronicled the lives of Richard Nixon and Chuck Colson is a recent convert who underwent quite a radical conversion. He does a fine job of bringing the life of his subject to a whole new generation. While it may lack the depth of some of the greatest biographies of the greatest Christians, it is eminently readable and enjoyable from the first page to the last. A unique contribution of this book is that it relies on diaries and correspondence that have previously been unpublished. Newton's own writing, and especially his letters, provide a good deal of the book's content and some of its most edifying. In fact, the content and depth of these letters persuaded me to seek out a volume published by Banner of Truth titled simply The Letters of John Newton. The theme of this biography can be aptly summarized by the final words spoken by this hero of the faith. "I am a great sinner, but Christ is a great Savior." This account takes us from Newton's days of joyous depravity to his dramatic conversion to his new life and ultimately to the moment he went to meet the great Savior he had come to know and love. It is a worthwhile addition to any library.

Like many believers before and since, John Newton was a man who struggled. He had struggles with his temper, foul language, immorality, morally dubious business, rejection, and so many other things in his life. Yet, once he came to know Jesus in a personal way at 23, Newton encountered a grace that was not only greater than all his sin but that would, in time, transform him into one of the most godly men of Christian history. This grace would even lead him to mentor William Wilberforce, whose tireless efforts brought down the trade that had earlier supplied Newton's livelihood! There is so much more that could be written about John Newton, from his humility to his generous heart. Yet, readers should never forget that all the good in Newton's life came from knowing that he was a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior. (347)

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