



## Letters of John Newton

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These letters provide a wealth of instruction and breathe a spirit of deep devotion to Christ and his Word.

### Letters of John Newton Details

Date : Published November 1st 1988 by Banner of Truth (first published 1911)

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Author : John Newton

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### **Wodu says**

This is timeless stuff! And I'll be re-reading and re-reading!

He articulates so well the disparity between our faith in Jesus and our practice, and tirelessly points to Jesus, who absolutely saves us from getting what we deserve and lessens and lessens the disparity till the day we become like him.

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### **David says**

Really enjoyed reading these. Very encouraging and especially good for considering God's love and mercy and providence in our trials. Highly recommend!

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### **Seth says**

These letters tell a different story than I expected to see, and one that emphasizes all the more the understanding that Newton had of grace.

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### **Allen Tsai says**

Much to learn from Newton's pastoral heart for people and his skill in counseling them from the Bible. His faithfulness to others is clearly rooted in a heart overwhelmed by God's faithfulness to him. There's much gold to glean here for practical ministry.

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### **Nick Roark says**

Wonderful

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### **David says**

When thinking of John Newton, two things usually come quickly to mind; He was a slave trader who was later converted by the Gospel, and he wrote the hymn Amazing Grace in response. What does not come quite so quickly to the forefront of my picture of Newton is that he was an incredibly compassionate pastor and friend who took time to write many letters of encouragement and exhortation to many who knew him.

Newton was born on July 24th, 1725. His mother died shortly before his seventh birthday and his father, a

shipmaster, took the boy to sea as a sailor by the time Newton was eleven years old. Despite his father's plans for John to work on a sugar plantation in the Jamaica's, Newton continued to sail, including a time of forced service in the British Navy. Flogged for attempting to desert, Newton was reduced to suicidal despair and was sustained only by his affection for one Mary Catlett, who later became his wife. In 1748 he sailed as first mate on the slave ship Brownlow and, while suffering a period of severe illness during this voyage, fully committed his life to Christ.

Following his marriage to Mary Catlett in 1750, he was again often at sea. He served as Captain on three voyages of slave trading ships before being forced into retirement following a severe stroke in 1754. Even after this, however, Newton continued to invest in slaving operations run by his father's friend and somewhat mentor to Newton, Joseph Manesty. It was not until much later in life that Newton fully and finally renounced the practice of slavery. Indeed, some 34 years elapsed between his retirement and his publication in 1788 of a pamphlet titled "Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade", in which he both described the tragic conditions suffered by slaves during passage, and his confession of humiliation at having been involved in such an horrific business.

In 1754, however, and no longer able to sail, Newton took a job in Liverpool as a tax collector. His fervor for faith continued to grow and he spent his idle hours learning Greek and Hebrew. He was for some time a lay evangelical minister and was well respected for his ministry. Seeking to formalize his position, he applied to the Church of England for ordination in 1757, but it would be some seven years before they agreed to ordain Newton, installing him in the Parish of Olney in 1764. He served as a Church of England priest until his death in 1807.

Newton was a competent preacher and his home was open to all, especially welcoming and hospitable to those who were beset by trial and temptation. Seeing in Newton a figure that could empathize with their own weaknesses, they were able to unburden themselves to a sympathetic and especially tender pastor who knew well the frailties of sin. Nonetheless, Newton saw his letter writing as his primary gift saying "It is the Lord's will that I should do most by my letters." Newton was not unaware of the blessings his letters brought others and saw his correspondents as those to whom he could "send [his] heart by turns."

And this he does. In letters to his brother-in-law pleading that he consider the case for Christ with the same attention he gives his career; in letters to young Christian women who have met together for the purpose of doing good to the less fortunate; in letters to the nobility who provide him patronage and financial support. In all things, Newton displays as a primary thing, his loving concern for his reader. In writing to John Catlett, his unbelieving brother in law, he states "Nothing but the real regard I have for you would make me so often resume an argument I have so little success in enforcing." Newton's drive for his brother in law, as for all his readers, is a genuine concern for their comfort – both in temporal and earthly states, and their eternal, spiritual well-being. Newton continually relates the bodily affliction and trials that beset his correspondents with spiritual realities, not degrading either one or the other, but soundly acknowledging both as real and God sent.

At their core, Newton's letters are rooted in the reader's reality. They do not exist in order to impress with his wisdom or holiness, but bring the timeless advice of Scripture to bear on the lives of his readers. Because of this, these letters withstand being lifted out of context and can still speak to us. They are rich in the distilled truth of the Bible applied to circumstances in life to which we can all relate; doubt, fear, illness, sorrow, joy, sense of sin, grace, and so on. Newton does not so much quote Scriptures to the reader as he presses the teachings of the Bible together, and in so doing, renders a fragrant perfume of truth that is both timely and timeless.

The book itself is pleasing to read. Rather than grouping letters into thematic blocks, or even chronologically, the editor has arranged them into groups of letters to a specific person or group of people, often over an array of years. This makes the reading much easier as one can simply let each letter stand for itself as they are not forced into acting as a support for a particular viewpoint, or even as representative of Newton at any given point in time.

The Table of Contents is clear and contains short summaries of each of the letters contents. This makes it helpful for looking what Newton may have to say on a subject; affliction, for example. More helpful would have been a comprehensive index, but this is not a major failing and the Table of Contents will, I suspect, be sufficient for most readings of the Letters.

Extremely helpful, however, are the editor's brief biological sketches at the start of each new section of letters. These short thumbnails typically outline the relationship the reader had to Newton and any particularly interesting facts about the recipient's life. These somehow help cement the letters to real people in real places and offer good insight into the nature of Newton's style. One can discern distinct differences he has when writing to clergy compared to, for example, a group of young women seeking to grow in sanctification, and the notes by the editor are a great assistance in approaching the text that follows.

Newton's letters are great insight into ways to think about God when we find ourselves in the messy stuff that is life. Profoundly practical, they offer the modern reader the exact thing they doubtless brought to the original recipient – insightful, practical words to encourage ordinary people who find themselves 'doing life' in the vast array of situations that entails.

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### **Michael Rachel says**

Excellent book from the pen of John Newton. Helpful, practical, pastoral, warm, and theologically rich.

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### **Jeff Boettcher says**

An excellent source of rich pastoral wisdom seeped with Gospel truth. John Newton was a man who had tasted deeply of the grace of God revealed through Jesus Christ. His depth of affection for Christ rings out from every page.

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### **Mike E. says**

#### **QUOTES:**

I set no value upon any doctrinal truth, further than it has a tendency to promote practical holiness. (20)

I am persuaded that love and humility are the highest attainments in the school of Christ, and the brightest evidences that He is indeed our Master. (39)

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### **Joel says**

There are a several gems in this collection of letters John Newton wrote to those in his area of influence. He was filled with the wisdom that comes from difficult life experience under the grid of the Gospel. There are probably five or so that I will go back to for this wisdom and insight, especially in the letters on remaining sin in the believer and the letters on calling to the ministry.

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### **Melanie says**

The best book I've read so far in the course of the RUF internship. Selected pastoral letters from John Newton, 18th-century English preacher and former pirate. My favorite essays included "What the Believer can attain to in this Life" and his three-part reflection on the progressive work of grace: "Grace in the Blade," "Grace in the Ear," and "The Full Corn in the Ear."

Newton is devoted and earnest; and the more time I spent with him, infectiously so. This is a book of essays to be kept close at hand and read over and over. I'm currently keeping it in my purse--it's a small volume--to pull out and read in idle moments.

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### **John Winterson says**

Having read a great deal of Spiritual literature over the years, it is fair to say that most of it makes the same points in much the same way. It is worth noting that this applies across all denominations, the greatest writers of each reaching similar conclusions by different paths. Little of this huge genre is without any merit, but, in the majority of cases, reading one devotional work can sometimes feel like reading them all. So few of them have been reread. This book is an exception, being read cover to cover several times and giving fresh insights every time.

This is because John Newton really understands sin. Unlike the many saintly men who wrote more high-minded works, Newton means it literally when he says he is a sinner. For many years, before his dramatic conversion, he led a singularly irreligious life. He was, infamously, the master of a slave ship. It is hard to imagine anything worse, with the possible exceptions of a commandant of a concentration camp or an NKVD commissar.

Although he later became a leading abolitionist, Newton never lost his own sense of sin, or of God's mercy in forgiving him. This finds its greatest expression in his hymn 'Amazing Grace,' arguably the best short form expression of Christian experience ever written.

He expands on this at greater length in his personal correspondence. He was a prolific letter writer and soon established a reputation as a Spiritual counsellor, especially to young men aspiring to the pastorate. Although a firm Calvinist, Newton, like most of the best Christian writers, sets little value on minor sectarian or doctrinal differences. His appointment as a clergyman of the Established Church in no way lessened his

connections with Nonconformist friends, who were among his correspondents here.

This tolerance makes him more accessible to modern Christians, even if his language might sometimes sound a bit archaic to some. The fact that he was a convert is also helpful to the increasing proportion of Christians today who were not always Christians.

His constant theme, again in common with all the best Christian writers, is the need for total dependence on God and total submission, in faith, to His Will. Where Newton differs from many other writers is in his frankness about such faith not coming all at once. Although his actual conversion was abrupt, there was much that preceded it and much that had to follow. Newton describes this in his 'Authentic Narrative,' which is also recommended very highly, and the fruits of that very long period of preparation, trial and error, and reflection are here in the letters. Newton is a master of human nature – later generations might describe him as a psychologist – and, as such, he understands how growth, including Spiritual growth, is usually a very long, slow process, involving many failures and mistakes. We do not become perfect in a moment.

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### **Keir says**

A collection of letters displaying the heart of a true pastor. This should be required reading for every pastor.

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### **Jason Kanz says**

This was a really excellent book. oh to have a spirit like Mr. Newton

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### **James says**

I periodically re-read. Much mature and sound wisdom here

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