

Newton's Grace Study/Discussion Guide

BASIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways has the film inspired you? Challenged you?
2. What lines or scenes particularly stood out to you?
3. What were the central themes of the film?
4. Was there any part of the film that confused you?
5. Have you ever experienced a complete turnabout in your life?
6. How have you experience God's grace in your life?
7. How has faith changed the direction of your life?
8. What do you believe needs to be changed in our society?
9. What people in the Bible stood up for justice for the oppressed?
10. What cause of justice do you feel God is calling you to stand up for?

ADVANCED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/MATERIAL

John Newton grew up with an emotionally distant and often absent father. He found a "second father" in Joseph Manesty, who encouraged him and mentored him.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: How does a distant/emotionally cold parent affect our perception of God? What theology and beliefs about God may unconsciously flow from the child's experience of a parent? How can a surrogate parent (teacher, Scout leader, family friend) later help heal those wounds?

Newton was clearly a troubled young man. Today he might be diagnosed as having Impulse Control Disorder. Even after being promoted to midshipman, when he decided to desert, he didn't think forward to the potential consequences. Yet as he matured, he became one of the most wise and respected religious leaders of his day.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Do you know a young person who is impulsive, lacks normal control, is always getting into trouble? These young people can be very difficult to deal with. But God can often use them, as He used Newton. How do we express God's grace to them in a way that helps them overcome their impulsiveness? How do we receive them in worship, in Sunday School?

Newton recounts a strange, Tolkienesque dream involving a ring, a tempter, and a savior. At the end of the dream, the Stranger says "If you were to be entrusted with this ring again, you would soon bring yourself into the same distress. You are not able to keep it. But I will preserve it for you. Whenever it is needful, I will produce it on your behalf."

DISCUSSION QUESTION: How did Newton's dream speak to you? How does the Stranger keeping the ring for when it is needed speak of God's grace and the ways that God cares for us in our weakness?

Newton clearly was a man of his day, and for a long time did not see anything wrong with the slave trade. It was socially acceptable in his day, a very profitable part of the structure of the economy. In the movie, older John Newton says "Everyone in England that had any money at all had it invested in the slave trade, it was very profitable. And where profit is concerned, we turn a blind eye, don't we?"

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What do we turn a blind eye to in our day? What today brings great profit to a few and yet harms our society, our collective souls? What highly profitable injustice breaks the heart of God?

In the wonderful 2006 movie *Amazing Grace*, (a story really about William Wilberforce), the great actor Albert Finney portrays Newton as being guilt-ridden and haunted by dreams. But this fails to capture the deep understanding of grace and forgiveness that Newton expresses in both his hymns and his writings.

In "Approach, My Soul, the Mercy-Seat," he writes:

Bowed down beneath a load of sin,
By Satan sorely pressed,
By wars without, and fears within,
I come to thee for rest.

And then:

"Poor tempest-tossed soul be still,
My promised grace receive;"
'Tis Jesus speaks, I must, I will,
I can, I do believe.

Though aware of his own transgressions, the older Newton was also freed from guilt and was able to use his experiences to change society.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: How can God forgive great wrongs and relieve the heart of crippling guilt without our forgetting the wrong things we have done? What is your experience of great forgiveness? How can true grace liberate a heart from terrible wounds?

"Newton's Grace" does not adequately portray the suffering of slaves on the "middle passage," primarily due to our limited budget. But as Newton's heart was changed, and he understood the terrible wrongs of the slave trade, he became an activist in trying to abolish the practice. In 1787, Newton wrote a tract supporting the campaign, 'Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade', which was very influential. You may be sure that his actions alienated many wealthy parishioners and were quite controversial.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What issues call for Christian activism today? How can we be more prophetic in our churches? In our society? What resistance would you expect, and why?

RESOURCES

The Olney Hymns

It is easy to forget that congregational hymn singing is a relatively new practice. In the Roman Catholic Church and the Established Church (the Church of England), only chants and psalms were used; other types of hymns were not authorized in the Book of Common Prayer until 1820. Though the Moravian Church published the first hymnals for congregational use in 1505, congregational singing did not really become common until the end of the 18th century. Hymns were commonly used in Methodist chapels, but not in most churches in Newton's day. In a way, his use of poems set to common, familiar tunes was the 18th century equivalent of "contemporary Christian music."

Newton wrote nearly 300 hymns, including:

- Amazing Grace
- Approach, My Soul, the Mercy Seat
- Day of Judgment! Day of Wonders!
- Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken

Many of the **Olney Hymns** were written with the poet **William Cowper**. They express their basic points of faith: the inherent sinfulness of man; religious conversion; atonement; activism; devotion to the Bible; God's providence; and the belief in an eternal life after death. The hymns were primarily written for day-to-day use in Newton's ministry at Olney. Here they were sung, or chanted, in church or at Newton's other Sunday and weekday meetings as a collective expression of worship.

The Ring Dream

Newton's description of his "Ring Dream" from his autobiography:

Though I have written out a relation of this dream more than once for others, it has happened that I never reserved a copy; but the principal incidents are so deeply engraven on my memory, that I believe I am not liable to any considerable variation in repeating the account.

The scene presented to my imagination was the harbor of Venice, where we had lately been. I thought it was night, and my watch upon the deck ; and that, as I was walking to and fro by myself a person came to me, (I do not remember from whence,) and brought me a ring, with an express charge to keep it carefully ; assuring me, that while I preserved that ring, I should be happy and successful ; but if I lost or parted with it, I must expect nothing but trouble and misery. I accepted the present and the terms willingly, not in the least doubting my own care to preserve it, and highly satisfied to have my happiness in my own keeping.

I was engaged in these thoughts, when a second person came to me, and observing the ring on my finger, took occasion to ask me some questions concerning it. I readily told him its virtues; and his answer expressed a surprise at my weakness, in expecting such effects from a ring. I think he reasoned with me some time upon the impossibility of the thing; and at length urged me, in direct terms, to throw it away. At first I was shocked at the proposal ; but his insinuations prevailed. I began to reason and doubt myself ; and at last plucked it off my finger, and dropped it over the ship's side into the water; which it had no sooner touched, than I saw, the same instant, a terrible fire burst out from a range of the mountains, (a part of the Alps,) which appeared at some distance behind the city of Venice. I saw the hills as distinct as if awake, and they were all in flames. I perceived, too late, my folly; and my tempter, with an air of insult, informed me, that all the mercy God had in reserve for me was comprised in that ring, which I had wilfully thrown away. I understood that

I must now go with him to the burning mountains; and that all the flames I saw were kindled upon my account.

I trembled, and was in a great agony; so that it was surprising I did not then awake: but my dream continued; and when I thought myself upon the point of a constrained departure, and stood, self-condemned, without plea or hope, suddenly, either a third person, or the same who brought the ring at first, came to me, (I am not certain which) and demanded the cause of my grief. I told him the plain case, confessing that I had ruined myself wilfully, and deserved no pity. He blamed my rashness; and asked if I should be wiser supposing I had my ring again? I could hardly answer to this; for I thought it was gone beyond recall. I believe, indeed, I had not time to answer, before I saw this unexpected friend go down under the water, just in the spot where I had dropped it; and he soon returned, bringing the ring with him. The moment he came on board the flames in the mountains were extinguished, and my seducer left me. Then was "the prey taken from the hand of the mighty, and the lawful captive delivered." My fears were at an end, and with joy and gratitude I approached my kind deliverer to receive the ring again ; but he refused to return it, and spoke to this effect: If you should be intrusted with this ring again, you would very soon bring yourself into the same distress; you are not able to keep it; but I will preserve it for you, and, whenever it is needful, will produce it in your behalf."

Upon this I awoke in a state of mind not easy to be described: I could hardly eat, or sleep, or transact my necessary business, for two or three days. But the impression soon wore off, and in a little time I totally forgot it ; and I think it hardly occurred to my mind again till several years afterward.

- The life of the Rev. John Newton, rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London.
(American Tract Society edition, 1830) Pages 16-18

Informative Web Sites

Newton's Grace Movie website: <http://www.newtonsgracethemovie.com>

Information site on John Newton: <http://www.johnnewton.net> (launching 2/2017)

The John Newton Project: <http://www.johnnewton.org/>

The Abolition Project: http://abolition.e2bn.org/people_35.html

The tune we commonly associate with "Amazing Grace" the hymn, New Britain, was first published in 1829, but probably was a folk tune earlier. However, Newton's poem was certainly sung to other "Common Meter" tunes originally. The most common early tune was "Hephzibah" (also known as "Tisbury"), which is very unfamiliar -- and probably unsingable for most modern congregations! You can hear a sample at the website below.

Early Tunes:

<http://www.markrhoads.com/amazingsite/TunePages/Hephzibah.htm>

BOOKS

The life of the Rev. John Newton, rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London. An authentic narrative, written by himself: to which some further particulars are added.

by Newton, John, 1725-1807

The original version is available for free download in various formats:

<https://archive.org/details/lifeofrevjohnnew00newt>

An updated version for today's readers by Dennis R. Hillman:

Out of the Depths: The Autobiography of John Newton, Dennis R. Hillman. Kregel Publications. Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003.

John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace by Jonathan Aitken and Philip Yancey. Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 2007.