



# Carmelite Spiritual Center

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Feb. 10, 2000 A.D.

## Life is Worth Giving

The True Story Behind "Amazing Grace" Hymn

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

One of the most beloved and oft-sung hymns in the American Christian tradition is "Amazaing Grace." It is difficult to attend any type of religious gathering and not hear the stirring words and music which seem to touch so many hearts and souls in an uplifting manner. It is, indeed, a hymn dear to so many people in so many ways:

"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. 'Twas <sup>c</sup>grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved; How precious did that grace appear, The hour I <sup>r</sup>first believed."

## Story Behind the Hymn

But the story behind the <sup>i</sup>hymn is equally <sup>i</sup>inspiring and uplifting. And the focus of the story is John Newton (1725-1807), an English sea captain who became wealthy in the notorious and degrading slave <sup>(TRADE)</sup> among English, the U.S., and the West Coast of Africa. Among decent men, Capt. John Newton was considered an outcast, a "slaver."

But the scorn and  contempt of decent men and women had seemingly no  effect, as Capt. Newton navigated his great sailing ship between the southern ports of the U.S., and Africa. He seemed to be immune to pangs of <sup>(CONSCIENCE)</sup>  as he loaded his ship with human cargo, in chains: black men, women and children, captured from their families and tribes, and confined in the stinking hold of Capt. Newton's ship for the weeks-long journey to America. Those who died enroute were tossed to the sharks in the  Atlantic; those who survived were put ashore and sold as beasts of burden to plantation owners and others.

#### Lack of Conscience

Many Christians thought that Capt. Newton simply had no conscience or even human feeling for the sufferings endured during and after the slave voyages. Nothing seemed to help him understand or care about their plight.

But one foul night as the ship headed for the American coast, a storm began to brew that threatened to engulf both ship and cargo and send them to the bottom of the Atlantic. Huge waves swept the deck as Capt. Newton struggled at the  wheel to keep the ship facing into fury of the storm. Winds howled and threatened to  tear the masts off the ship. Capt. Newton, who to that point feared neither God nor man, began to wonder if they would survive.

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When all seemed lost, a strange event took place. The seaman who was assisting Capt. Newton suddenly shouted in terror, and called up the name of Jesus. The name brought Capt. Newton a sense of fearlessness, and he began to pray.

"Dear God," he shouted through the howling gale, "get us safe ashore and I will be Your slave forever."

Eventually, the storm subsided and the ship was able to complete its journey to America.

#### Keeping a Vow

But did Capt. Newton keep the vow he made in the midst of the terrible storm? So well did he keep his vow that a few years later he was ordained a clergyman and worked to end the slave trade.

In addition, he began to <sup>WRITE</sup> hymns, especially the "Amazing Grace" which reflected his encounter with God in the Atlantic. In all he authored some 280 hymns. And when he died in 1807, after years of repentance, <sup>(REV. NEWTON)</sup> he requested that the following words be carved on his tombstone:

John Newton, Clerk  
Once An Infidel and Libertine  
A seller of Slaves in Africa  
Was, by the Rich Mercy of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ  
Preserved, Restored And Pardoned,  
And Appointed to Preach the Faith  
He Had Long Labored to Destroy.