

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

How sweet the sound! He had shipwrecked his life, but during an ocean storm John Newton began to discover amazing grace.

We left Cape Lopez (Africa) and, after a few days stay at the island of Annabona to lay in provisions, we sailed homeward. This was about the beginning of January 1748. From Annabona to England, without touching at an intermediate port is more than 11,000 kilometres when you follow the trade winds.

We sailed west until near the coast of Brazil, then northward, to the banks of Newfoundland. We left the banks on March 1, with a hard westerly wind that pushed us fast homeward. Because of the length of this voyage in a hot climate, the vessel was greatly out of repair and unfit for stormy weather. The sails and cordage were worn.

I went to bed that night in my usual security and indifference, but was awakened from sound sleep by the force of a violent sea, which broke on us. Much of it came down below and filled the cabin where I lay. A cry from the deck said the ship was going down. I started to go on deck, but was met on the ladder by the captain. He told me to bring a knife.

I returned for the knife and another went up in my place. He was instantly washed overboard. We had no leisure to lament him, nor did we expect to survive him long. The sea had torn away the upper timbers on one side and made the ship a mere wreck in a few minutes.

It was astonishing, and almost miraculous, that any of us survived. We immediately manned the pumps, but the water increased. Some of us were sent to bail out another part of the vessel. We had 11 or 12 people bailing, but she was full, or near it. With a common cargo she would have sunk, but we had a great quantity of beeswax and wood on board, which were lighter than the water.

The day began to break and the wind abated. We used most of our clothes and bedding to stop the leaks, though the weather was exceedingly cold - especially to us who had so lately left a hot climate. Over our clothes and bedding we nailed pieces of board. At last the water abated.

At the beginning I was little affected. I pumped hard and endeavoured to animate myself and my companions. I told one of them that in a few days this distress would serve us for talking about over a glass of wine. He, being a less hardened sinner, replied with tears, "No, it is too late now." About nine o'clock, almost totally fatigued with cold and labour, I went to speak with the captain. As I returned, I said, "If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us!" This (though spoken with little reflection) was the first desire I'd breathed for mercy for many years. I was instantly struck with my own words: What mercy can there be for me? I was obliged to return to the pump, and there continued until noon. Almost every wave broke over my head, but we fastened ourselves with ropes that we might not be washed away. Every time the vessel descended into the sea, I expected she would rise no more.

I dreaded death, and my heart feared the worst if the Scriptures, which I had long opposed, were true. Still I was but half convinced and remained for a time in a sullen frame, a mixture of despair and impatience. I thought that if the Christian religion were true, I couldn't be forgiven.

I have never allowed March 21 to pass unnoticed since 1748. On that day the Lord delivered us from deep waters. I continued at the pump from three in the morning till near noon, and then I could do no more. I lay down upon my bed, uncertain, and almost indifferent, whether I should rise again. An hour later I was called. Not being able to pump, I went to the helm and steered the ship till midnight. I had the opportunity to think of my former religious professions, the calls, warnings and deliverances I'd had; the licentious course of my life, particularly in making the gospel the subject of ridicule. I thought there never was, nor could be, such a sinner as myself. I concluded that my sins were too great to be forgiven.

I waited with fear and impatience to receive my inevitable doom. About six in the evening the ship was freed from water, and there arose a gleam of hope. I thought I saw the hand of God displayed in our favour - I began to pray. I could not utter the prayer of faith; I could not draw near to a reconciled God and call Him Father. My prayer was like the cry of ravens, which yet the Lord does not disdain to hear. I now began to think of that Jesus whom I had so often derided.

I recollected the particulars of his life and his death - a death for sins not his own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in him. Now I chiefly wanted evidence, I rather wished than believed that these things were real. The great question now was how to obtain faith - how I

should gain an assurance that the Scriptures were of divine inspiration. One of the first helps I later received was from Luke 11:13, for here I found a Spirit spoken of and communicated to those who asked. My purposes were strengthened by John 7:17. I concluded that though I could not say from my heart that I believed the gospel, yet I would for the present take it for granted, and that by studying it in this light I should be more and more confirmed in it.

The wind was now moderate, but continued fair, and we drew nearer to our port. We began to recover from our consternation, though we were greatly alarmed by our circumstances. The water had floated all our movables in the hold, all the casks of provisions had been beaten to pieces by the violent motion of the ship. Our livestock, such as pigs, sheep and poultry, had been washed overboard in the storm. All our food except the fish and some intended for the hogs was gone - we had but a week at scanty allowance. The sails were mostly blown away, so we advanced slowly even with fair wind. We imagined ourselves about 500 kilometres from the land, but were in reality much farther.

We alternated between hope and fear. My leisure time was chiefly employed in reading and meditating on the Scriptures, and praying for mercy and instruction.

Finally our fair wind subsided and, next morning, a gale sprung up from the south-west, directly against us, and continued for more than a fortnight. The ship was so wrecked we were obliged to keep the wind always on the broken side, unless the weather was moderate.

With the wind in that quarter we were driven farther from our port. Our situation deprived us of any hope of being relieved by other vessels.

Half a salted cod became a day's subsistence for 12 people. We had plenty of fresh water, but no bread, few clothes and very cold weather. We laboured continually with the pumps to keep the ship above water. Much labour and little food wasted us - one died. Our sufferings were light compared with our fears. We had a terrible prospect of being either starved to death or reduced to feed upon one another. Our expectations grew darker every day; and I had a further trouble peculiar to myself.

The captain, whose temper was quite soured by distress, was hourly reproaching me as the sole cause of the calamity. He was confident that if I was thrown overboard, and not otherwise, they should be preserved from death. He didn't intend to make the experiment, but the continual repetition gave me much uneasiness, especially as my conscience seconded his words. I thought it probable that all that had befallen us was on my account. I was at last found out by the powerful hand of God.

When we were ready to give up all for lost, the wind came about to the very point we wished it, so that the broken part of the ship could be kept out of the water. As gently as our few remaining sails could bear it, we continued.

On April 7 we were called up to see land - the island of Tory. The next day we anchored in Lough Swilly, Ireland, four weeks after the damage we sustained from the sea. Before we had been there two hours, the wind began to blow with great violence. If we had continued at sea that night in our shattered, enfeebled condition, we would, to all human appearance, have gone to the bottom.

About this time I began to know that there is a God who hears and answers prayer.

John Newton (1725-1807), an Englishman, was back at sea soon after this experience. In 1750 he married and made several voyages as the master of his own ship. In 1755 he became tide surveyor in Liverpool. In 1764 he was offered the curacy of Olney where he enjoyed the friendship of the poet William Cowper. From 1779 until his death he was the rector of St Mary Woolnoth, London. He is best remembered today as the writer of the hymn "Amazing Grace." This account is adapted from a series of letters Newton wrote that were first published in 1764.