

Newton on his wife's Death

In February of 1790, the Newtons had celebrated their 40th year anniversary, but by the end of that year, his wife Mary was sick and dying. He had been expecting her death for a few weeks when he wrote to John Ryland. These words are moving and searching (written on 6 November 1790) as he struggled with his fears of losing his wife. Does he pray for her recovery or for her release to be with the Lord? How does he decide? His words are both wise and weighty.

I am neither worthy nor competent to choose for myself. The Lord condescends to choose for me. I can neither pray for her stay here, nor her release; but with a reserve to his wise and holy will. He *has done*, and he *will do* all things well. He has spared us together more than forty years. I have more reason to be thankful for the long loan, so underserved by me, and which I have deserved to forfeit every day, than to complain that he is now about to recall his own. I have ten thousand mercies to be thankful for. O magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt his name together. Yet I need and request your prayers and the prayers of all my Northampton friends...¹

In his diary, he wrote similarly as he looked to the Lord regarding his wife's state:

Through the Lord's mercy my mind is calm and resigned. I have not one allowed wish to alter His appointment, were it possible. Instead of complaining that she is to be taken from me now, what reason have I for admiration and praise that she has been spared to me for so long, when I have justly deserved to forfeit her every day of my life. How few in their married state live together upwards of forty years! Still fewer who preserve their mutual affection unabated for so long a term. (Quoted in Bull, *Life of Newton*, p. 260)²

She did die about a month later. Yet, he preached on the day she died (Dec. 15) and never skipped a week right after her death. He, like so many preachers, understood what he so aptly called "Doctor Pulpit" (that is, preaching can have a powerful affect on the preacher as well as the people and rather than sitting alone and pitying oneself, he went about doing the Lord's work). He remarks, "There is something fascinating in grief, painful though it is, we are prone to indulge in it, and to brood over the thoughts and circumstances which are suited (like fuel to fire) to heighten and prolong it."³

John Newton exhibited practical divinity in his life. His theology writ large in the way he responded to personal struggles and disappointments commands our attention. Such maturity and godly responses reveal the Lord's sanctifying hand. It takes grace to respond graciously in times of affliction. May our gracious Lord give us such grace!

He did not display his manly character only during this time but it continued after she died. It left an indelible stamp on him and the wound would cause him to yearn for the glory to come. Such is the Lord's way with his servants.

¹ *Wise Counsel*, 237.

² Cited by Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, 239.

³ *Wise Counsel*, 240.

After she died

This is his testimony of the Lord's faithfulness to Newton after Mary's death. "I have been and am, wonderfully supported. My attachment to my dear was very strong, indeed idolatrous; yet I have been far from sinking under the stroke. Neither her sickness nor her death prevented me from preaching a single sermon."⁴ (26 March 1791) In his affliction, he saw the hand of the Lord through it all. But as the Lord sustained him, he also looked at life and the world differently; it supplied him with little joy. He wrote, "The Bank of England is too poor to compensate for such a loss as mine." (Quoted in Bull, *Life of Newton*, p. 262)⁵ Again, "The world is too poor to repair my loss. It is a wound which can only be effectually healed, by him that made it. And faithful, indeed, are the wounds of such a friend." (26 March 1791)⁶

Her death enabled him to no longer fear death. In fact, he welcomed it. "For myself, I do not feel afraid of death, but my hope is in him, to give me dying strength for a dying hour; otherwise I shall prove a coward. I thank him, likewise, that I am not unwilling to live, for surely the world has little to charm me with *now*. She is gone, who once seemed as necessary to my comfort as the light. But the Lord is all-sufficient. He can make the hard easy, and the bitter sweet, and he does. You and I have reason to thank him for such help in the day of trouble, as only he can give. May we never forget his goodness!" (Aug. 23, 1791)⁷

A few lessons

- 1) Is there not a lesson here for us to learn? Through it all, Newton saw the hand of God in bringing this about and through it all, he found the Lord a faithful supporter; he was sustained wonderfully by His Father's mighty hand.
- 2) One of the things that amaze me in working through his letters is the simple depth of his wisdom and insight. He saw life accurately and spiritually. His weighty but simple and humble responses and understanding convey an extreme depth of godliness that could not be faked. It was consistent throughout his life even while he was painfully aware of his failures, sins and proneness to leave the God he loved.
- 3) Deaths around him caused Newton to yearn for heaven. Several references to her in his letters reveal both his longings for her as well as his deep sense of loss. He considered the prospect of his own death and the joyful reunion with the saints he had loved: "There [i.e. in heaven] I hope to meet you and many more, whom I have loved at Northampton, Olney, and elsewhere; then to see my dear Mary and Eliza; and above all to see him, whom having not yet seen, I trust is the Lord and beloved of my heart. To see him as he is, and to be like him! This is worth dying for, and worth living for, till he shall say, 'Come up hither.'" (336) When he heard of the death of one of his close godly friends, he wrote: "Although the Lord has given me many friends, he was my particular intimate... I shall not miss him long." (356) Here, he knew where he was going and that it would be soon.

Praying for someone who might die

All of us face death; it befits our fallen condition. But as renewed creatures in Christ, we look at it differently. We come to terms with it in the light of God's sovereignty, wisdom, and good purpose. "But he is in the hands of Him who does all things well. When the hour comes

⁴ *Wise Counsel*, 241.

⁵ *Wise Counsel*, 239.

⁶ *Wise Counsel*, 243.

⁷ *Wise Counsel*, 246.

that He will have his servants with Him in heaven, our prayers cannot detain them upon earth, nor ought we to wish to keep them here contrary to His will, if we could. We may say ‘help, Lord for the godly fail’ [Ps. 12:1] at a time when their example and prayers seem especially needful. And He can help; when He take one home to himself, he can raise up two.” (Aug. 22, 1799)⁸

On his dying well

[Sept. 20, 1797] “Pray for an old man aged 72 years, one month and sixteen days, at the date of this. That the remainder of my span may be devoted to *him*, and that the evening of my life may not disparage my profession and ministry.” (346)

[Nov. 29, 1799] “Old as I am, I shall not die before my set time. Pray for me, that I may have grace to improve the present, and, to be prepared for the future, that whenever the Lord shall call me hence, I may be ready and willing to go. Indeed I see little in this world worth living for on its own account; though I think no one has less reason to be weary of life. But I am not my own, and desire to have no choice for myself. May we live to His praise, and die in His peace!” (369)

John Newton and his daughter, Miss Catlett

After his wife died, John Newton was cared for by his adopted niece whom he loved dearly (the other adopted niece died early in her teens). Eliza greatly helped her father and was very attentive to his needs; he wrote several letters to her while she was away at school when she was young (which were eventually published). In 1801, Newton wrote that Betsy had “been long, by the Lord’s blessing, the staff and comfort of my old age.” (383) Yet, she eventually fell into a deep melancholy and was expected to die. He took her to a doctor friend to treat her; he moved there to visit her frequently as she underwent treatment. She was not doing very well but notice what Newton wrote in response to these events:

But her case is in the Lord’s hand, and I believe He only by his voice which raises the dead, can effectually relieve her. Her malady and distress have rather increased than otherwise since we came. But I have cause to praise the Lord that she is quiet and gentle, affectionate to me, and properly attentive in all [except] exercising what concerns herself. There indeed her imagination is awfully confused. But it is the Lord, and He is pleased to help me in a measure, to submit to his will, and to be willing to wait His time. But the flesh is weak, and my feelings painful. But He mercifully supports me. I am sure He does all things well, and I humbly trust that all shall work together for his glory and to our good in the issue. (389)⁹

The case of Robert Hesketh

At 75 years of age, John Newton wrote this about Robert Hesketh: “I long thought him one of the most spiritual, heavenly minded men I had known. And as such, I could have staked my

⁸ *Wise Counsel*, 364.

⁹ She did not improve so he had to put her in a psychiatric hospital. His diary states: “Thou didst send her to me when she was little more than five years old. Thou gavest me a parent’s heart for her...but this year it has pleased thee to require of me, as thou didst Thy servant Abraham, to resign my Isaac, my beloved child to thy sovereign, wise, and holy will. She is now in Bethlem.” (391) By 1802, she was well enough to return home and assist Newton. She married in 1805 to an optician, Joseph Smith.

character, in recommending him.... how the fine gold was become dim!" (385) He apparently swindled people and had brought great dishonor to the Lord. Earlier, he had said this of him: "There was a time when I used to look up to Robert Hesketh almost with envy. I scarcely remember anyone, whom I thought more humble, spiritual and devoted. I thought him so for several years. But afterwards he fell off in a very awful degree indeed!" (354)

Newton apparently was willing to give him something to help (perhaps money) but he was grieved by how the gold had dimmed. "However, for old acquaintance sake, and in hopes that the Lord will sanctify his afflictions, I enclose a small token of love which you will please to give him. I pity him and pray for him while the pen is in my hand. May we meet in heaven!" (386)

There was a glimmer of hope that Hesketh was restored. "It will rejoice me, to hear that you have reason to hope the Lord has fully restored him. Then I think, according to Ralph Erskine's idea when we meet in heaven, he and I may dispute for the lowest place. Surely none of the redeemed in glory will afford stronger proofs, that it is a faithful saying, 'that Jesus Christ came into the world to save chief sinners', than he and I. If you continue to think well of him, assure him of my love and prayers." (355)

Apt quotes

[Jan. 20, 1789] "Tell the Lord your trials...., and leave them with him; hope against hope, and wait patiently for the event." (215)

[Aug. 22, 1799] "For were I left but a little to myself, the enemy would soon make sad work with me." (364)

[Aug. 22, 1799] "We see but in part, a small part indeed, and therefore, we are often in perplexity. If our views were more extensive, we should be more satisfied that the Lord does all things well. But faith is the evidence of things not seen. The Lord increase our faith!" (365)

[Nov. 1799] "All hearts and means are in his hands and he could as easily provide for fifty children, if you had so many, as for five, as for one."¹⁰ (367)

[Nov. 29, 1799] "Indeed at the age of 75, it becomes me, while writing today, not to take it for granted that I shall be able to write tomorrow." (369)

[April 18, 1800] "However, I believe and am sure, that let who will plot, and strive and rage, nothing shall take place, but what He has determined; and He promises to those who simply and quietly depend upon Him, strength according to their day. The Lord reigns; the time is short; the fashion of the world is passing away. The hour is coming, when neither the pleasant nor the painful, will be any more to us, than the events which took place among the antediluvians." (377)

[Jan. 16, 1801] "I tell my hearers repeatedly that the glorious gospel of the blessed God, when received in simplicity and faith, is a catholicon [a universal remedy], a balm for every wound, a cordial for every care." (380)

[Jan. 16, 1801] AT AGE 75 he wrote, "The sin of my nature cleaves close to me as my skin, and infects all I say or do. But it is given to me to believe that the blood of Jesus cleanseth from all sin, and that when He said, 'Him that cometh, I will *in no wise* cast out', he

¹⁰ This sentence comes from a letter to a widow whose godly husband "exchanged earth for heaven and a bed of languishing for a seat near the throne." (367)

meant as He spoke, and will make His word good. Upon this rock I build. Other refuge have I none.” (381)

[May 28, 1801] “If all will be well *at last*, all must be well *now*.” (389-90)

[Oct. 10, 1801] “We are the Lord’s and He has a right to what He sees fit with his own.” (394)

[April 23, 1803] “Blessed be the Lord, I can see that my acceptance, and perseverance, do not depend upon my frames or feelings, but upon the power, compassion, care and faithfulness of Him, who in the midst of all the changes to which we are exposed in this wilderness state, is unchangeably the same, yesterday, today, and forever.” (396)

Newton died Dec. 21, 1807 (82 yrs. old)!