

A Double Portion of my Thoughts and Prayers:  
John Newton's Letters to William Wilberforce

*Both the importance and the difficulties of your situation,  
superadded to my regard,  
entitle you to a double portion of my thoughts and prayers.<sup>1</sup>*

MARYLYNN ROUSE  
The John Newton Project,  
[www.johnnewton.org](http://www.johnnewton.org)

“Sir,” wrote William Wilberforce in great distress to John Newton on Saturday 2 December 1785, “I wish to have some serious conversation with you.” Though he possibly had not seen him for fourteen years, Newton was the one person whom Wilberforce felt he could trust for spiritual advice in his conversion crisis, knowing that anything he said would be held in complete confidence. Almost two years later, on Sunday 28 October 1787, with an even deeper, proven friendship and mutual regard between them, it was Newton whom Wilberforce had at his side for further serious conversation on the day that he was to enter in his diary, “God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners.”<sup>2</sup>

John Newton, the ex-slave trader, had not long been curate-in-charge at Olney when all his savings, which he had entrusted for safekeeping to his former employer Joseph Manesty, disappeared through the bankruptcy of Manesty's shipping company in 1766. John Thornton of Clapham<sup>3</sup> providentially stepped in to provide Newton with a regular annuity of £200, enabling him to offer hospitality and to contribute to some of the needs of the poor around him.

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<sup>1</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f34, 10 June 1791, Bodleian Library.

<sup>2</sup> *The Life of William Wilberforce*, Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, 1838, vol 1, page 149.

<sup>3</sup> John Thornton, 1720-1790, whose son Henry became a close friend of William Wilberforce.

Through this new friendship, Newton met Thornton's half-sister, Hannah and her husband William Wilberforce<sup>4</sup> and invited them to spend some time with him at Olney. When they next stayed at Newton's vicarage, in June 1771, "Master Wilberforce",<sup>5</sup> aged 11, accompanied them.<sup>6</sup> All too mindful of the wasted years of his own youth, Newton had a strong concern for young people. It was not surprising that this meeting and possibly others endeared him as a father-figure to the young William, so recently deprived of his own father.<sup>7</sup>

However, Wilberforce was soon removed by his mother from the evangelical circles of London, in the hope that he would lose all sense of those Methodistical influences. But Newton retained his prayerful interest. Hannah's husband was on the point of leaving for Yorkshire, when he received a letter from Newton saying, "I beg to be remembered likewise to Master Wilberforce when you see him."<sup>8</sup>

To Hannah, Newton wrote, "I hope your nephew engages good bodily health, and his soul nourished and refreshed; and though he lives in a barren land, I trust he finds that the Lord can open springs and fountains in the wilderness. The word of grace and the throne of grace afford wells of salvation, from which he cannot be debarred; from thence, I hope, he will daily draw with joy the water of life, and, like a tree of the Lord's planting, strike root downwards, and bear fruit upwards, and experience that the Lord is able to keep, establish, and comfort him, though for a season he is deprived of the public ordinances of the Gospel."<sup>9</sup>

Their pathways diverged for a while. Newton's ministry at Olney lasted 16 years, during which time he enjoyed the close friendship of William Cowper (remembered forever in their joint production of the

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<sup>4</sup> William Wilberforce, [1721 – 1777] son of William Wilberforce [1690-1774] of Hull.

<sup>5</sup> William Wilberforce, MP [1759-1833].

<sup>6</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 120-121, 4 July 1771. Wilberforce's portrait by John Russell, 1770, shows him at this same age (11), while he was under the care of his aunt and uncle.

<sup>7</sup> *William Wilberforce*, John Pollock, Lion 1986 edition, page 5. Pollock quotes Wilberforce's reminiscences of Newton, "even reverencing him as a parent when I was a child."

<sup>8</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 122-123, 25 November 1774.

<sup>9</sup> *Gleanings*, ed E Powell, 1824, undated letter, 391.

*Olney Hymns*<sup>10</sup>), and amongst many other achievements, laid the foundations amongst the Northamptonshire Baptist ministers for a missionary-minded Baptist Association to develop out of their high Calvinism. In 1780, John Thornton procured Newton the living of St Mary Woolnoth and he moved to Charles Square, Hoxton. In September that year Newton dined with John Thornton and Hannah Wilberforce at Clapham.<sup>11</sup> The following month William Wilberforce, the newly elected MP for Hull, took his seat in Parliament for the first time.

Just as Newton had discovered on the *Greyhound* that fateful day of 21 March 1748, when a sudden and violent storm in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean had flung one of his shipmates overboard and threatened instant death to the rest of them every moment as the ship broke up around them, for Wilberforce too, “now the Lord’s time was come.”<sup>12</sup> The age gap between John Newton and William Wilberforce was 34 years and 20 days.

Having abandoned his childhood spirituality, but with a conscience suddenly deeply stirred by recent readings of the Scriptures and Doddridge’s *Rise and Progress*<sup>13</sup> with Isaac Milner,<sup>14</sup> Wilberforce was in turmoil. His Journal reveals his anguish as he longed to consult with someone spiritually wise and trustworthy:<sup>15</sup>

30 November. I thought seriously this evening of going to converse with Mr Newton.

2 December. Resolved again about Mr Newton. It may do good; he will pray for me. Kept debating in that unsettled way... whether to go to London or not... went at last in the stage to town – inquired for old Newton; but found he lived too far off for me to see him.

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<sup>10</sup> *Olney Hymns*, John Newton, 1779. In his preface to this publication, Newton explained that one of his designs in embarking on writing the hymns together, was that it should be “as a monument, to perpetuate the remembrance of an intimate and endeared friendship.”

<sup>11</sup> 129 Letters from the Rev John Newton, Rector of St Mary Woolnoth, to the Rev William Bull of Newport Pagnell, 1847, page 100, 25 September 1780.

<sup>12</sup> *An Authentic Narrative*, John Newton, 1764.

<sup>13</sup> *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, Philip Doddridge, 1745.

<sup>14</sup> Isaac Milner [1750-1820], formerly assistant teacher to Wilberforce, later Dean of Carlisle.

<sup>15</sup> *Life*, vol 1, 92-97

3 December. Had a good deal of debate with myself about seeing Newton.

As if the clinch the matter, Wilberforce sat down and penned a note:

To the Rev John Newton

Dec 2 1785

Sir, I wish to have some serious conversation with you...  
[ending,]

PS Remember that I must be secret, and that the gallery of the House [of Commons] is now so universally attended, that the face of a member of parliament is pretty well known.

Despite “ten thousand doubts”, he made his way to St Mary Woolnoth for the evening service, and delivered his note to old Newton afterwards in his vestry. A date was arranged for their secret meeting. It was to be on Wednesday, at the Newtons’ home in Charles Square. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the central area was grass bordered with trees. But for Wilberforce it might as well have been lined with all the inquisitive spectators of the House of Commons gallery, for all the confidence he could summon up to brace himself for a conversation that might end his promising political career. It was a point of no return.

Wednesday. After walking about the Square once or twice before I could persuade myself, I called upon old Newton –  
6 December. Was much affected in conversing with him – something very pleasing and unaffected in him.

He discovered that his confidant “had always hopes and confidence that God would sometime bring me to Him.”<sup>16</sup> Newton knew all too well the ragings of an awakened conscience and could counsel him from the heart. He encouraged him to remain in politics, not to forsake his present friends, and not to rush into new acquaintances. He spoke gently of the workings of the Spirit of God in the heart of man and gave him a copy of his own “great turning day” experience to read.<sup>17</sup> “When I came away”,

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<sup>16</sup> *Life*, vol 1, 97 (refers to Journal, 6 December 1785).

<sup>17</sup> *An Authentic Narrative*, John Newton, 1764.

Wilberforce wrote, "I found my mind in a calm, tranquil state, more humbled, and looking more devoutly up to God."

The following Sunday he headed down for St Mary Woolnoth with a lighter heart. He heard Newton preaching "on the addiction of the soul to God. They that observe lying vanities shall forsake their own mercy. Excellent. He shows his whole heart is engaged." Wilberforce attended Newton's church every Sunday in December and was sometimes at his midweek lectures on Wednesdays. By Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> December he felt able to say, "he has my leave to mention my case to my aunt and Mr Thornton." Newton wrote to him a few days later, "I saw Mrs Wilberforce today, and left her in tears of joy. She says you may depend on her strictly observing your requisitions."<sup>18</sup>

Wilberforce's doubts did not disappear instantly. His diary shows he was worried, feeling "very wretched— all sense gone. Colder than ever – very unhappy."<sup>19</sup> And eventually on Monday 2 January 1786 "called at Newton's, and bitterly moved: he comforted me." Newton recommended that he regularly attend the lectures of Thomas Scott, who had recently become chaplain of the Lock Chapel in London.<sup>20</sup> When Henry Venn came to hear of it, he wrote excitedly to a friend, "Mr Wilberforce has been at the chapel, and attends the preaching constantly. Much he has to give up! And what will be the issue, who can say?"<sup>21</sup>

In January, Wilberforce brought Newton back to Wimbledon after church. He dined and slept there – "composure and happiness of a true Christian: he read the account of his poor niece's death, and shed tears of joy,"<sup>22</sup> Wilberforce wrote in his diary. The following day he and Newton were seen walking together on the common in the evening. "Expect to

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<sup>18</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f1, 22 December 1785.

<sup>19</sup> MS Don e f50 [Wilberforce's Diary], Bodleian Library.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Scott [1717-1821], Bible commentator, who also held the lectureship of Bread Street Church on Sunday afternoons.

<sup>21</sup> *The Life and a Selection from the Letters of the late Rev Henry Venn*, ed. H Venn, with a Memoir of his Life by J Venn, 1835, reprinted 1993, 435 of reprint.

<sup>22</sup> Newton's *Works*, vol 5, *A Monument to the Praise of the Lord's Goodness, and to the Memory of Dear Eliza. Cunningham*, first published as a Tract for private distribution in November 1785. Eliza was buried by Newton on 12 October 1785 at St Mary Woolnoth.

hear myself now universally given out to be a Methodist: may God grant it may be said with truth,"<sup>23</sup> he noted.

A circle was gradually forming of Christian friends who were to have a profound impact on the whole country and improve the lives of many in other nations: John Thornton's son Henry, Henry Venn's son John, Hannah More, William Wilberforce and Henry Foster,<sup>24</sup> supported in teaching and pastoral advice by their elders, John Newton and Thomas Scott. There was much that the younger man wanted to learn, and much that the older longed to impart. Wilberforce was keen to meet and talk. Although Newton often had a succession of visitors on Saturdays, the day that best suited Wilberforce, he gladly offered to free up time, inviting him to dine with them at 2pm. "From that time till five or half past five, I could have you to myself in my study, let who would come."<sup>25</sup>

Several times over these months, Wilberforce entered in his diary, "Newton dined with me".<sup>26</sup> Newton wished that Wilberforce could visit him often but conceded this was not practicable in his political duties. "But whenever you can call, you will be a welcome guest," he assured him, "Great subjects to discuss, great plans to promote, great prospects to contemplate, will always be at hand. Thus employed, our hours, when we meet, will pass away like minutes."<sup>27</sup>

As much as he would have loved to have spent an hour with Wilberforce every week, "or every day," – "from morn to noon, from noon to dewy eve, a summer's day"<sup>28</sup> he elaborated in old age – their different situations did not allow it. "Yet I trust we are both in our assigned posts, and the servants of the same Lord; I look forward to an approaching period, when our communication with Him, and in Him with each other, will be perfect, perpetual, and without interruption."<sup>29</sup> A valuable correspondence developed between them, which is currently being prepared for publication.

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<sup>23</sup> MS Don e f51, Wilberforce's Diary, January 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> 1786.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Foster [1745-1844], rector of St James Clerkenwell. When in Olney, Newton sometimes exchanged pulpits with Foster.

<sup>25</sup> MS Wilberforce c49, f1, 22 December 1785.

<sup>26</sup> e.g. MS Don e f51 Wilberforce's Diary, Sun 26 Feb 85: Lock, Newton. Newton dined with me, Sun 19 Mar: Mr Newton dined with me.

<sup>27</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f4, 21 March 1786.

<sup>28</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f 116, 4 May 1803.

<sup>29</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 52-53, 2 October 1794.

"I believe you are the Lord's servant," he told Wilberforce, "and are in the post which he has assigned you; and though it appears to me more arduous, and requiring more self-denial than my own, I know that He who called you to it, *can* afford you strength according to your day, and I trust He *will*, for He is faithful to his promise."<sup>30</sup> He upheld, as examples, men in Scripture who had held responsible positions in government. "My heart is with you, my dear Sir. I see, though from a distance, the importance and difficulties of your situation. May the wisdom that influenced Joseph and Moses, and Daniel rest upon you. Not only to guide and animate you in the line of political duty – but especially to keep you in the habit of dependence upon God, and communion with him, in the midst of all the changes and bustle around you."<sup>31</sup>

Newton prayed constantly for him. Delighted by Wilberforce's recovery from a long and serious illness in early 1788, he confided that even when this had seemed the least probable outcome, his hopes for him had been stronger than his fears, the reason being: "The desires and opportunities the Lord has given you, of seeking to promote the political, moral and religious welfare of the Kingdom, has given me a pleasing persuasion that He has raised you up, and will preserve you to be a blessing to the public."<sup>32</sup>

Some years later he again made this point. "Your life likewise appears to me of great importance both to the church and to the nation. However, you are immortal as to the present state till your work is done, and I will hope that the period of your services is yet at a great distance."<sup>33</sup> But illness would be an ongoing problem for Wilberforce. He needed to be encouraged that God was Sovereign in even this. Times of illness need not be lost times, if used to fix one's heart more firmly "to be His wholly, and to serve him with your All." They taught "the importance of eternal things, and the comparative insignificance of all things in this transient state", lessons which would be of great value in the future. In fact, "The difficulties and snares attendant upon your situation, makes me consider your afflictions as especially tokens of the Lord's love to you and care over you; and I humbly and cheerfully expect that you will come out of the furnace, refined like gold."

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<sup>30</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 71-72, 21 July 1796.

<sup>31</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f9, 18 May [1786].

<sup>32</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f 16 [1788].

<sup>33</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f 104, 15 September 1800.

Further encouragement and guidance could be found in Scripture, in considering the two sisters, Mary and Martha, who “seem apt emblems of the active and contemplative life. They both loved our Lord, and they both showed that love to him, but in different ways.”<sup>34</sup> He pitied Martha, rather than blamed her. It was much more pleasant to sit at the feet of Jesus and hear his gracious words than to be engaged in hurry and bustle. Martha was properly employed, but she lost her temper, incurring rebuke. Here was a lesson:

“They who have the honour of living for public, must submit to live the less for themselves, and to be abridged in many things that contribute to the comfort of a Christian. And as they are likewise exposed to more snares and difficulties, they need a double portion of grace and watchfulness. They may sometimes suffer loss. The Lord is able to keep those who trust in him, though they live in the fire, or in a den of lions, if they are there by his appointment.”

“You are called not to live to yourself,” he often reminded him,

“I have some conception, though I suppose a faint one, of the difficulties attending your situation. I doubt not but you would often be glad to share with us who move in a more humble sphere, in the privileges we have, in the choice of our company, and the disposal of our time. But you are in your appointed post, and the Lord supports you in it. You live like the young men, and Daniel in Babylon, preserved in the midst of flames and lions; because the Lord is with you.”<sup>35</sup>

Indeed the great point for our comfort in life, he felt, was to have a well-grounded persuasion that we were where, all things considered, we ought to be. “He is always near. He knows our wants, our dangers, our feelings, and our fears. By looking to him we are enlightened and made strong out of weakness.”

“I do not envy you, Sir,” he said,

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<sup>34</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 47-48, 30 August 1793.

<sup>35</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 62-63, 4 July 1795.

“even the opportunities you have of doing good in promoting the cause of God, in pleading the cause of the oppressed, or in relieving the distress of individuals. Much less do I envy you the apparatus of your post. Nor need you envy me the advantage I have of you in the dispersal of my time, and in the choice of my company, if we are both where we ought to be.”<sup>36</sup>

Newton hoped Wilberforce would look to Scripture for his chief instruction, but responded to his enquiries on reading material. He lent him “Austin’s *Confessions*,”<sup>37</sup> commenting that he did not have his *Meditations*, which Wilberforce may have requested. The suggestions he gave for “a plain enquirer” were “2 or 3 good books of Bunyan’s, such as the *Jerusalem sinner saved* and *Come and welcome to Jesus Christ* and *Grace abounding to the chief of sinners*,”<sup>38</sup> adding, “Baxter’s *Call*,<sup>39</sup> and Alleyne’s *Alarm to the Unconverted*<sup>40</sup> have been useful to many; Flavel on *Providence*<sup>41</sup> – on *the Keeping of the heart*,<sup>42</sup> and any of his works, most of which have been published in small books – his *Spiritual Navigation*.<sup>43</sup><sup>44</sup>

He was very concerned about Wilberforce’s health and prayed that the spa waters might be beneficial to him, “For I feel for you, when I think of the approaching hurry of Parliament business.”<sup>45</sup> But he saw the young Christian aiming high in his spiritual ideals, imposing some unnecessary inconveniences on himself, and attempted to bring him down to earth again. “I approve and admire your motive for the mode of travelling which you chose, but I could not help wishing, that in consideration of the infirm state of your health, you had not obliged yourself to walk to the Inn so early in the morning, nor to the hurry of a coach which goes from London to Bath in a single day [a distance of 116

<sup>36</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 47-48, 30 August 1793.

<sup>37</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f3, 6 March [1786].

<sup>38</sup> John Bunyan: *The Jerusalem sinner saved*, 1689; *Come and welcome to Jesus Christ*, 1678; *Grace abounding to the chief of sinners*, 1666.

<sup>39</sup> *A Call to the Unconverted*, Richard Baxter, 1658.

<sup>40</sup> *An Alarm to Unconverted Sinners*, Joseph Alleine, 1671.

<sup>41</sup> *The Mystery of Providence*, John Flavel, 1678.

<sup>42</sup> *On the Keeping of the Heart*, John Flavel, 1671.

<sup>43</sup> *Navigation Spiritualized, or A New Compass for Seamen*, John Flavel, c.1670.

<sup>44</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f3, 26 March 1786.

<sup>45</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f11, 1 November 1786.

miles].” To reassure his own mind, he asked for “a line by your order from Mr Cragg informing me that your health is not worse than when we parted”.

Newton acted as a sort of clearing house for papers as well as missionaries themselves, many of whom passed through his hands as they left for pioneering work overseas. “I expect that a Mr Cary will shortly wait upon you,” he wrote to Wilberforce, “and will probably bring an introductory line from me,”<sup>46</sup> Thomas Robinson of Leicester had asked Newton to act on William Carey’s behalf. “He has for some time had a strong desire of preaching the Gospel among the heathen, and the accounts he received from Mr Thomas (of whom I know nothing but from Mr Grant) determined his choice to Bengal.” There was special reason for approaching Wilberforce. “Mr Cary wishes to know if it be practicable to procure the Company’s leave for his passage thither, or if he might be permitted to stay, if he could find his way by a foreign ship. He thought, if you and Mr [Henry] Thornton approved of his character, motives and ends, your patronage might probably enable him to go. However this may be, if you could afford him a short audience, you could perhaps give him such advice in a quarter of an hour, as might put him in a right path, and be useful to him through life.”

Carey told Newton he was “ready to go anywhere, to the ends of the earth, so that he might preach the Gospel.” Newton added to Wilberforce, “I mentioned America, that there was an open door to Canada and Nova Scotia, particularly to New Brunswick; whether he considers himself too far engaged for Bengal, to think of any other place I know not, but perhaps a word from you might have weight.” From Robinson’s testimony, Newton was confident that Carey “may be depended upon as a faithful man; and that his zeal to be a Missionary is not the flight of a warm fancy, but the desire of a man who is willing to give up, and to hazard everything for the glory of God and the good of souls.”

Wilberforce’s sons later recalled their father often saying,

“I do not know ... a finer instance of the moral sublime, than that a poor cobbler working in his stall should conceive the idea of converting the Hindoos to Christianity; yet such was Dr Carey.

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<sup>46</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f 46, 27 May 1793.

Why, Milton's planning his *Paradise Lost* in his old age and blindness was nothing to it."<sup>47</sup>

Some years earlier, Newton had confided to Wilberforce,

When I think of the trials to which those are exposed who willingly offer themselves to serve the Lord among the heathens; and when I think of some at home, whose situation and calls to public service, require, though in a different way, almost equal zeal and self denial, I shrink into a button and feel my own comparative insignificance. But I am often cheered by that thought of Milton, They also serve, who only stand and wait – I hope I am where I ought to be. And if I am not called to do *great* things, it is a mercy and an honour to do *any* thing, in such a cause. [Life was valuable] "if I may but live to the Lord, and for him."<sup>48</sup>

Newton's correspondence with Wilberforce covered topics such as prison visiting, political pressures and opportunities, spiritual advice, marriage, life and death, true wisdom, the establishment of chapels of ease, Christian witness, the slave trade, political and national affairs, missionary work, "book reviews", family matters and mutual friends. He constantly tried to discern what Wilberforce's needs, pressures or temptations might be and how to address them. His wise counsel was permeated with prayer.

Just as he prayed often for himself that the close of his life may be "without any stain unsuitable to my character as a Christian and a Minister,"<sup>49</sup> so he constantly urged Wilberforce to honour his calling. He thanked God for what He had done for them both, reminding Wilber that much more remained to be done, and that they were called and encouraged to press forward. Not to advance, he cautioned, was to go back. For there would be no standing still at the same point. One of Newton's frequent prayers for Wilberforce was "that the Lord may be your Sun and Shield".<sup>50</sup> The phrase appears in David's affirmation in

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<sup>47</sup> Life of Wilberforce, Vol 4, 123.

<sup>48</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 43-44, 4 Aug [1792].

<sup>49</sup> Princeton University, Firestone Library, Newton's Diary, March 1804.

<sup>50</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f 11, 1 November 1786.

Psalm 84:11, *For the Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly.*

In Olney, Newton had preached from this Psalm, drawing attention to David's being styled as the man after God's own heart "on account of his love to the word, ways, people and ordinances of God".<sup>51</sup> Although David had been driven into the wilderness when fleeing from King Saul, which prevented him from worshipping in the Tabernacle, yet he "retained the savour – and he breaks forth at a distance, *How amiable [are thy tabernacles, O Lord God of hosts]!*" Newton felt keenly for Wilberforce, whose busy, pressured, public life could often keep him away from the company of believers, with little time or opportunity for reflection and fellowship. Perhaps one may draw the parallel that, like David, Wilberforce was often driven away from the Tabernacle, or the living church of God, into a spiritual wilderness. Newton longed for him to "retain the savour" of communion with God, "that he may be your Sun and Shield, your Counsellor and Comforter here, and your portion forever."<sup>52</sup>

Just as David had been exposed to hostile elements and enemies in the wilderness, so for Wilberforce Newton observed "The snares, dangers and impediments which surround you are numerous and great."<sup>53</sup> The encouragement was, "But the Lord can make you superior to them all – to those who walk with him in the path of duty, and simply depend upon him for guidance and strength, He will be both a Sun and a Shield." Even while Newton was in great anguish during his wife's last few dying days when she was "so low and weak, that she can neither move nor be moved, can hardly bear to speak, or to hear my voice, if I attempt to speak to her,"<sup>54</sup> his heart still went out to Wilberforce in the same letter, "And I often pray, that he may make you an instrument of much good in your public line of service, support and guard you, in the midst of all the snares and difficulties and temptations to which it is exposed, and fill your soul with his wisdom, peace and consolation."

Some years later he returned home one night to find a note from Charles Grant, informing him that Mrs Wilberforce was dangerously ill. He wrote immediately to Wilber, though he could scarcely see what he

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<sup>51</sup> Newton's pocket sermon notebook No. 43, Cowper & Newton Museum, Olney.

<sup>52</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 43-44, 4 August [1792].

<sup>53</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 29-30, 1 July 1789.

<sup>54</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f32, 23 November 1790.

was writing by candle-light,<sup>55</sup> "It sent me to my knees... Surely I can sympathise with you! I likewise have stood in the post of painful observation darker every hour."<sup>56</sup> I have trodden the painful path before you." He dearly loved them both and prayed for Barbara's recovery and their peace of mind. "Your affliction, My dear Sir, did not spring out of the ground," he wrote. His suffering was in the Lord's hands. He was called now to a Post of Honour.

"Many eyes are upon you, both your friends and your enemies, have seen that the Lord has been wonderfully with you in your public life. You will now, I trust, burn and shine in a different situation to the praise and glory of his grace, and to the increase of your experience and wisdom, power and faithfulness."

He visited Wilberforce at the Palace Yard, and saw how he lived "in parliament-time". His business there and the constant demands being made on him, the ever present company of others, the importance of his situation and the great influence he was exercising for good, caused the older man to declare, "you have need of almost miraculous supports and supplies."

How he longed for "an hour's tête à tête" with Wilberforce safely concealed in his study at No. 6 Coleman Street Buildings, "where I could have you to myself – without loud raps at the door to interrupt us." Wilberforce responded in person within days. He attended Newton's church that Sunday, and after first calling in on Henry Thornton at Kings Arms Yard, he strolled the little extra distance to spend an uninterrupted hour with Newton.<sup>57</sup>

Newton was most concerned not to take up too much of Wilberforce's time, or strain his weak eyes from reading letters. Wilberforce assured him that he would be very pleased to hear from him, but was in turn conscious of Newton's many correspondents. "It is true I have many correspondents, but they have not prevented me from writing to you more frequently,"<sup>58</sup> Newton replied. "I have been rather afraid of

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<sup>55</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f 105, 30 September 1800.

<sup>56</sup> Referring to his wife's last months, weeks and days as she lay dying from cancer, Edward Young wrote of his own experience, in *Night Thoughts* (1742), ... Dreadful post of observation, Darker every hour.

<sup>57</sup> *Life*, vol 1, page 227 [5 July 1789].

<sup>58</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 47-48, 30 August 1793.

breaking in upon you, unless I had something of a *dignus vindice nodus*.”<sup>59</sup> But Wilberforce’s kind encouragement had decided Newton upon a compromise. “I seem determined to wait upon [you] with a letter, without ceremony or apology, about once a quarter, while I am able to write at all. You will please to accept this, as my first payment, for the Michaelmas quarter.”

So began their “quarterlies”. Urgent business was dealt with as it arose, but four times a year Newton would write something to Mr Wilberforce which he hoped would be especially edifying. “That the power, presence and promises of God, may give efficacy to all your endeavours for the service of mankind; and support you under every trial to which He may see fit to call you, is the frequent prayer of, My dear Sir, Your most obedient, obliged and affectionate servant.”<sup>60</sup>

He supposed Wilberforce might wish to have more control over the use of his time and choice of company. “But though you live in the midst of hurries and snares, where almost everything seems to have a tendency to damp the noblest exertions of your mind, He who has appointed your station, has hitherto supported you in it, and I trust will still support you.”

The day before his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, the Ancient Mariner addressed another quarterly to Wilberforce, contemplating his approaching death. When a ship had made a trading voyage, touched at different places, in different climates, passed through a variety of winds and weathers, hardships and dangers, and was,

“as the sailors say, riding at simple anchor, in her last part, the business finished, all on board, and only wait for a wind to waft her home, the mariners go before her in their thoughts; they anticipate their arrival, and think with what pleasure they shall meet their friends and relations, from whom they have been long separated.”<sup>61</sup>

It gave him great joy to contemplate meeting with those he loved. Surely he would see Wilberforce’s uncle, John Thornton. “He was the instrument of God to me for good,” Newton recalled. “He supported me,

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<sup>59</sup> difficulty worthy of such an intervention Horace: *Ars Poetica* (CXCI).

<sup>60</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 37-38, 3 January 1792.

<sup>61</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 75-76, 30 March 1797.

while at Olney; to him I owe my present honourable comfortable and I hope, in a measure useful, situation here." And what of Hannah Wilberforce? "Shall I not be glad to thank your kind aunt, for all the kindness she showed me when she was below?" He longed also to meet "my dear Mary and Eliza," and many more. "But I please myself into thinking I shall be among the first of those, who will be waiting for you, to welcome you home to your Mansion in the Heavenly House."

In 1799, he broached this subject of chapels again with Wilberforce. He was in Southampton, staying with the Taylors.<sup>62</sup> "I believe I mentioned last year the state of the parish of Botley, where Mr Taylor lately purchased an estate, and where the people have little more sense of religion or means of instruction than those in the South Sea Islands"<sup>63</sup> There were many young people, but they were illiterate. The church was "two miles from the town (the road almost impassable in winter, even by a horse) and is not much larger than a common dining-room."

Taylor was willing to build a chapel at his own expense and put in a Gospel minister, with the incumbent's consent. But the difficulty was, how to make it a chapel of ease, "in the regular line," and at the same time to secure the nomination of proper preachers. While in Reading, Newton had heard that Wilberforce and his friends had thought of bringing a Bill into parliament, "for the relief of those who wish to build chapels upon this plan." He asked Wilberforce to send him his opinion "of the practicability of the design and the best mode of pursuing it." Wilberforce replied that he had already tried to persuade several bishops of the importance of chapels of ease and was making some headway, but the progress had been too slow to risk proposing this measure during the last session of parliament, as he had hoped to do. However, it was an objective that "I shall keep steadily in my eye."<sup>64</sup>

Encouraged by the fact that Wilberforce was already attempting to address the issue, Newton added a "PS" to his next letter:<sup>65</sup>

"Allow me to add a word upon the subject of chapels, though I suppose I shall only meet your thoughts. The people of Camberwell, Reading and some other places, when deprived of

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<sup>62</sup> Walter Taylor [1732?-1803], member of Above Bar Congregational and blockmaker to the navy.

<sup>63</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 91-92, [June or July 1799].

<sup>64</sup> *Life*, vol 2, page 342.

<sup>65</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f 93, 31 July 1799.

their parochial minister, have been compelled for the continuance of the Gospel among them, to take shelter under the Toleration Act, that is, to become dissenters. I am not much attached to names, but I cannot wish that the bulk of profession should insensibly fall into the dissenting line, especially as some of their evangelical teachers are not so sensible of our national blessings, nor so friendly to our constitution and government as I could wish them.

If a method could be devised for the Establishment of Regular Chapels of Ease, where needful, without the express consent of the new incumbent being essentially necessary, I think it might prevent many good people and good subjects from deserting the Establishment, and be thereby a means of strengthening the church and the state. I should be glad if our rulers in both departments saw the thing in this light. *But when I think of you, Mr Thornton and a few of your friends, I am ready to address you in the words of Mordecai – Who knoweth but God has raised you up for such a time as this!*"

The following year he prayed especially for this group as they took a holiday together. "I am often with you and Mrs Wilberforce, and Mr and Mrs H Thornton, in spirit, at Bangor. I sympathize with you in the sweets of retirements, which to gentlemen in your public line, must be doubly agreeable. My frequent prayer shall be that the Lord may bless the relaxation and the sea air, so that you may both return in health and strength, sufficient to support you comfortably in the approaching winter campaign."<sup>66</sup>

He advised Wilberforce not to be misled by other arguments, "A thousand things are started to draw our attention, to exhaust our strength, and to divert us from our course. Happy they who go forward with a single eye, and upon as strait a line as possible – and say to all that would intrude, I am engaged in a great design, and cannot stop, or turn aside, to talk with you."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f 104, 15 September 1800.

<sup>67</sup> Nehemiah 6:3.

In 1797 Wilberforce left for a fortnight in Bath hoping the spa waters would again improve his health. Before leaving, he asked his bookseller to deliver a copy of his *Practical View*,<sup>68</sup> hot off the press, to Newton's home address. On his arrival in Bath a few days later, he wrote to suggest to Newton that if he did not have time to "fight through the whole of it", he might "dip into the third or fourth chapters and perhaps the concluding one."<sup>69</sup>

Wilberforce was thankful "to have published what I may term my manifesto – to have plainly told my worldly acquaintances what I think of their system and conduct and where it must end." He felt "a solid comfort from having openly declared myself as it were on the side of Christ," and having shown where his hopes for his country lay. Newton was absolutely delighted to receive his copy and read it immediately. "Indeed, I have not properly *read* it yet, but I have *devoured* it,"<sup>70</sup> he confided to Wilberforce. "We can remember the time," he soberly reflected, "when you could not have written this book, and when I would not have read it if it had been put into my hands. The difference between what we are and what we once were, and what many still are, is all of grace."

At this point in writing, he was interrupted by the postman delivering the above letter from Wilberforce. "How could you think it possible," he remonstrated, "that I should be content with dipping in a book of yours?... You compel me, Sir, to say, that I deem it the most valuable and important publication of the present age that I have seen: especially as it is *yours*." Wilberforce had written of a real religion "so complete, so *totus teres et rotundus*,<sup>71</sup> so forcible and yet so gentle, so candid and yet so explicit." He marvelled at the goodness of God in having guided and guarded Wilberforce through so many embarrassments, snares and trials in his public life, to publish "such a book" without fear. Many may have watched and hoped for his downfall, but "That the Lord has raised you up to bear such a testimony, at a time like this, to His truth, revives a hope... He will not yet give us up." He

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<sup>68</sup> A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of this Country contrasted with real Christianity, William Wilberforce, 1797.

<sup>69</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff77-78, 19 April 1797, Wilberforce to Newton, from Bath.

<sup>70</sup> *Correspondence*, vol 1, 155, 21 April 1797.

<sup>71</sup> so complete, smooth, round, Horace, Sat. II, vii 86.

rejoiced to think “what additional weight it will give to all you say or do, as in other places, so especially in the House of Commons.”

He tried to call on Wilberforce in person, to congratulate him “*viva voce*” when he knew he had returned to London, but had to be content with writing later en route to his usual summer retreat at Southampton. “One thing strikes me very much and excites my praise to the Lord on your behalf. That a gentleman in your line of life, harassed with a multiplicity of business, and surrounded on all sides with snares, could venture to publish *such* a book, without fearing a retort either from the many friends or the many enemies amongst whom you have moved so many years.”<sup>72</sup>

To Charles Grant, Newton declared, “What a phenomenon has Mr Wilberforce sent abroad! *Such* a book, by *such* a man, and at *such* a time!”<sup>73</sup> Its great advantage was that it would be read “by persons in the higher circles, who are quite inaccessible to us little folks; who will neither hear what we can say, nor read what we may write. I am filled with wonder and with hope. I accept it as a token for good, yea as the brightest token I can discern in this dark and perilous day. Yes, I trust that the Lord by raising up such an incontestable witness to the truth and power of his Gospel, has a gracious purpose to honour him as an instrument, of reviving and strengthening the sense of real religion where it already is, and of communicating it, where it is not.”

In his annotated copy of *Practical View*,<sup>74</sup> given him “from the author”, written in his own hand are the comments:

Second reading begun 20 April 1797

Finished the second reading 10 May 1797

Finished the third reading ye 11 June 97

Fourth reading begun 19 Oct

This book made him reconsider the tone of his future “quarterly payments” to Wilberforce. “Though I have long been well satisfied that the Lord had in mercy set you apart for himself, yet I thought an occasional hint of the dangers to which you were exposed might not be unseasonable. But now I shall be glad to look to you (or at least to your

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<sup>72</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff79-80, 7 June 1797, from Reading.

<sup>73</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff125, 18 April 97, Newton to Charles Grant.

<sup>74</sup> Cowper & Newton Museum Library, Olney.

book) for cautions against the evils that beset my own path, and for considerations to strengthen my motives for running the uncertain remainder of my race, with alacrity.”<sup>75</sup> He closed his letter in prayer, “May the wisdom and power of the Most High guide, strengthen and protect you.” Newton wanted to lend the book to his adopted niece, Betsy (Elizabeth Catlett). But to make the position quite clear, he inscribed in it:

My regards for the author who gave me this book, will not permit me to part with my property in it, and therefore I can only *lend* it to my dear Elizabeth<sup>76</sup> during my life. If she survives me, it will then be her own. I commend it to her, as one of the best books (in my judgment) extant – and I hope she will find much pleasure and much profit from a frequent perusal of it. The Lord accompany her reading with his especial blessing! Amen. 10 May 1797

The book is punctuated with marks here and there, underlinings, and occasional brief comments (True, etc), the longest being on Wilberforce's statement: “In short, reasoning fairly, there is no medium between absolute Pyrrhonism and true Christianity...” Here Newton underlined absolute Pyrrhonism and wrote in the margin:

Uncertainty

Pyhrro professed that he could be sure of nothing – how could he then be sure even of this? According to his principles, he was not to give way to a carriage on the road. He could not be sure that it was a carriage, or that it would run over him, if he stood in the way, before it. Yet this is called Philosophy! Bethlem [the lunatic asylum] is a fit College for such Philosophers!

How much of Wilberforce's bold and clear delineation of real Christianity in his *Practical View* may have stemmed from Newton's gentle guidance and constant, wise counsel over the years, one can only speculate.

Wilberforce worked relentlessly on “the slave trade business.” In early 1788, sudden illness put him out of action. He was given two weeks to live. Pitt shouldered responsibility for the Abolition. A Bill to limit the

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<sup>75</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff79-80, 7 June 1797.

<sup>76</sup> Elizabeth (Betsy) Catlett [1769-1834] who married Joseph Smith in 1805.

number of slaves on board trading ships was introduced on 1 May, encountering opposition in the Lords in June, but finally granted Royal assent on 11 July. Throughout this time Wilberforce had been unable to participate. Newton wrote to update him while he was convalescing in the Lake District: "Sir Charles Middleton desired me to keep in the way, one week, if I should be wanted to give evidence at the bar of the House of Commons, but the business went on there very well without me. The next week I had an order from the Lords to attend them, but I was not called upon."<sup>77</sup>

He had been saddened by the spirit of opposition in the House of Lords. But Pitt's speech had impressed him. "I admire the firmness and integrity of the man, who in his situation, could take such an open and determined part in favour of the cause of humanity. Surely I am bound to pray for him, for I think he is raised up for the good of the nation, and to exhibit a proof to all Europe that in a statesman no less than in private life, honesty is the best policy." The following year, he re-iterated his thankfulness to God "for the wisdom, integrity and firmness with which he has furnished Mr Pitt for such a time as this." Pitt was entitled to the nation's esteem, "but it would perhaps give him more pleasure, if he could know how many prayers have been offered daily on his behalf."<sup>78</sup>

In the continuing struggle over abolition, Wilberforce was the target of slander and accusations and was even challenged to a duel by a West Indian captain. Hearing from Charles Grant that Wilberforce had gone to Bath again for the waters, Newton wrote to him there with kindly comfort and encouragement. "The situation of the slaves, and your exertions for their relief, are, if I may say so, palpable subjects – they are felt by all where sordid interest has not benumbed – and therefore your name will be revered by many, who are little affected by the love of the *Great Philanthropist*. If you therefore meet with some unkind reflections and misrepresentations, from men of unfeeling and mercenary spirits,

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<sup>77</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 17-18, 5 July 1788. He did, however, give evidence before the Privy Council when Wilberforce kindly arranged for Pitt to introduce him personally [*Correspondence*, pages 112-117, 13 December 1794] see also *Reports of the House of Lords Committee of Council*, 1789 and *Evidence to a Committee of the House of Commons*, 1790.

<sup>78</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 24-25, 16 Feb 1789.

you will bear it patiently, when you think of Him who endured the contradiction of sinners against Himself."<sup>79</sup>

He was keen to know from Wilberforce himself, his opinion on a rumour heard from the Rev Abraham Booth, Baptist minister, of a move to establish a Society in London, and throughout Britain, to ban the use of West Indian produce until the Slave trade Abolition should be abolished. Newton had heard from Henry Thornton that Wilberforce was apprehensive that such a move might divide the friends of the Abolition, and therefore could not support it. But he wanted to know from him directly. "My poor judgement will probably be asked upon the occasion, and I wish to speak after you," he explained.

Shortly before leaving on another visit to the health-giving waters of Bath in 1792, Wilberforce gave Newton a print of his portrait. It prompted a letter of heartfelt thanks from Newton, "I shall always look at [it] with double pleasure, as your resemblance, and your gift. I shall rank it among the most valued of my movables." Wilberforce had recently suffered defeat over the Foreign Slave Bill, so Newton added with unfailing encouragement, "But especially I am glad to view it as a memorial of the Lord's goodness to you, in honouring you to be his instrument of what has already been done, towards the abolition of the slave-trade. Much has been already done, and I trust you... live to see the accomplishment of your benevolent design."<sup>80</sup> As usual, he concluded in prayer, "That he may be your Sun and Shield, your Counsellor and Comforter here, and your portion forever, is the sincere prayer of, My dear Sir, your affectionate and obliged and obedient servant, John Newton."

In early December 1794 Wilberforce set aside a day of prayer and fasting<sup>81</sup> for "seeking God and praying for political direction, for a blessing on my parliamentary labours, on my country, and on those who have specially desired my prayers." Within days, a letter arrived from Newton,

"When you have the leisure to favour me with a line, I shall be glad of your judgment respecting the associations rapidly

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<sup>79</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 43-44, 4 August [1792].

<sup>80</sup> Wilberforce lived to see the Abolition of Slavery legalised (effectively, for it passed the 3<sup>rd</sup> reading in the House of Commons in 1833, just 3 days before he died).

<sup>81</sup> It proved a day not without interruptions, to his distress (see *Life*, vol 2, 65).

forming to stop the consumption of West Indian produce. If you and your friends who have exerted yourselves so nobly for the abolition of the slave trade, and are likewise known friends to government, were to recommend such a measure, I should readily adopt it. At present, and especially as a minister, I do not enforce it; I think it premature, and rather beginning, as we say, at the wrong end. In these noisy times I would be cautious of taking any steps which might even remotely seem to imply dissatisfaction with government. I judge of your sentiments by those of Mr Thornton and Sir Charles Middleton. But I wish, if you please, to have the sanction of your own name."<sup>82</sup>

In the spring of 1795 Wilberforce was further disappointed in the House regarding the Slave Trade, and upset with himself for having been less prepared than on other occasions. Newton sought to comfort him. "You have acted nobly, Sir, in behalf of the poor Africans," wrote Newton. "I trust you will not lose your reward. But I believe the business is now transferred to a higher hand. If *men* will not redress their accumulated injuries, I believe the *Lord will*. I shall not wonder, if the Negative lately put upon your Motion, should prove a prelude to the loss of all our West India Islands. Nor dare I say, I shall be sorry, if there is no other way to procure the abolition of that inhuman traffic."<sup>83</sup>

Newton's heart was pained "by the prevalence of sin and misery, and the evidences of God's displeasure, against a nation that has long enjoyed and long abused, more light, liberty and prosperity, than was ever vouchsafed to any people upon the face of the earth." He felt it must be even more distressing to Wilberforce, who, who from "higher ground" could see further. But to be more constructive, he concluded, "Let us look to the bright side. The Lord reigns. He has all hearts in his hands. He is carrying on his great designs in a strait line, and nothing can obstruct them."

At seventy Newton remarked that he felt well and truly an Old Man. He wondered if this might be his last "quarterly" to Wilberforce. Writing "not far from the verge of life",<sup>84</sup> he reflected on their citizenship being

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<sup>82</sup> *Correspondence*, pages 112-117, 13 December 1794.

<sup>83</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 60-61, 19 March 1795.

<sup>84</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 69-70, 30 March 1796.

in heaven, and reminded his friend that while they kept their aim on things unseen and eternal, the transient things around them would seem comparatively insignificant and trivial.

Not only were they travellers, but agents "bought with a price and ... not our own, commissioned and appointed ... to transact business for Him as we go along." Whilst he felt his calling allowed him a pleasant, mutually strengthening use of his time in and out of the pulpit, if he was wise and watchful, "It is otherwise with you," he empathised. "Much of your time is necessarily spent in connections and converse with those who can give you little direct assistance or comfort in your spiritual walk." But this could turn to his advantage: "So it is observed that the fire burns brightest in a severe frost."

The motives for fidelity and diligence in both their posts were powerful, "for we serve the Lord Christ, who has laid us under the strongest obligations of gratitude and love. But," he added tenderly, "we are not responsible for the success of our attempts." Just as David had wanted to build the Temple, but this task was reserved for his son Solomon, the Lord nevertheless accepted David's intention, "and was pleased to say, *Thou didst well that it was in thine heart...* So God accepts people, not according to what they have actually done in his service, but according to what they would have done, had they been able."<sup>85</sup> His illustrations prepared the way for comforting Wilberforce in his recent setback in Parliament.<sup>86</sup> "Your efforts in favour of the poor Africans have again been counteracted. But it was well it was in your heart to relieve them from oppression."<sup>87</sup>

He had been grieved to hear that the bill had been thrown out of the Commons – "not merely upon account of the Africans, but because I apprehend that if men refuse to redress them, the Great Avenger of

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<sup>85</sup> Newton made same this point in his *Amazing Grace* sermon of 1 January 1773 based on 1 Chronicles 17:16,17 (see *The Life of John Newton*, Richard Cecil, ed Marylynn Rouse, Christian Focus, 2000, page 365)

<sup>86</sup> The opposition forced the second reading to their numerical advantage, with Wilberforce rushing in from dinner at Palace Yard to hold the fort until more Abolition supporters could arrive. They got it through the committee, but it was thrown out at the third reading, "with enough at the opera to have carried it," lamented Wilberforce. He was sickened by the lukewarmness of the "supporters". *Life*, vol 2, 141-142.

<sup>87</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 69-70, 30 March 1796.

oppression will plead their cause Himself. Methinks I see his hand already lifted up.” He interpreted the nation’s recent naval calamity as evidence of this. “Our boasted fleet was to sweep the seas, to cover the West Indies, and to do I know not what. But the Lord said, It shall not be. He blew with his wind, they were scattered, disconcerted and driven back with heavy loss.” As an experienced mariner, Newton realised how rare it was for such a long series of southwest storms to hit. The timing had been critical, a providence about which he was deeply conscious in his own life. It had only been disputes about court-martials which had detained the fleet, otherwise, he reckoned, “they might have made their passage”. Moreover, “I think we have had more of these disasters in one year, than I have heard of in many years past. I do not impute it to negligence in the officers, but I fear it is a sign the Lord is against us, that so many disappointments occur.”

Newton had other fears for British servicemen, but his chief point was, “It is not Britannia as our boasting song pretends, but the Lord who rules the waves, and them who sail upon them.” He longed that great men and statesmen might acknowledge that, and seek His wisdom rather than the fragile spider’s webs of the finest spun schemes of men.<sup>88</sup> “One unforeseen contingency is sufficient to derange and sweep them away... But I seem to forget that I am writing to you.”

Added to the hardship of his own old age, was the mental derangement of Newton’s adopted niece, “my *Individua comes et umbra*,”<sup>89</sup> who was obliged to spend many months in the distressing Bethlem Hospital (where, as she improved, she was “a sort of Chaplain on a Lord’s day evening, to all in her ward who will attend, and has sometimes from 12 to 18 hearers, to whom she reads a chapter, a sermon, and gives out a hymn”). “My trial is great,” wrote Newton to Barbara Wilberforce in 1802, “but I am mercifully supported – I preach as much as at any former time, and am seldom at a loss when in the pulpit, though when out of it,

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<sup>88</sup> In his sermon notes on Genesis 15:1 preached in Olney, Newton wrote, “Too many would shelter themselves with a refuge of lies—self-righteousness, false notions of God’s mercy—repentance, promises and purposes are all they have to trust to. But this is like trusting to a cobweb to shield us from a cannon ball. Jesus is the only shield.” Newton’s sermon notebook No. 6, Cowper & Newton Museum.

<sup>89</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f79-80, 7 June 1797 [inseparable companion and shadow].

my recollection is so weak, that often in the afternoon, I forget that I preached in the morning."<sup>90</sup>

"I long much for a sight of you and Mrs Wilberforce," he admitted to Wilber the following year,

"Indeed I do long for it. But at present it is not practicable. However though absent in the flesh, I am present with you in spirit. I hope I shall never cease to love you both very dearly, to pray for you as well as I can, or to think with pleasure of my obligations to you."<sup>91</sup>

When Wilberforce's renewed motion of the Abolition was carried by 124:49 in its first reading on 30 May 1804, his aging mentor and prayer supporter was not to be deterred by increasing deafness and blindness, but raced off a note in exuberance. "Though I can scarcely see the paper before me," he scrawled,<sup>92</sup> "I must attempt to express my thankfulness to the Lord, and to offer my congratulations to you for the success which he has so far been pleased to give to your unwearied endeavours for the abolition of the slave trade, which I have considered as a millstone, sufficient, of itself sufficient, to sink such an enlightened and highly favoured nation as ours to the bottom of the sea."

He had feared the prejudices of the West Indian planters might have proved insuperable obstacles, "but I have a new proof now of what I always professed to believe, that to prayer, faith and patient perseverance, all things are possible. Whether I who am within two months of entering my eightieth year shall live to see the accomplishment of the work, is only known to Him, in whose hands are all our times and ways, but the hopeful prospect of its accomplishment will, I trust, give me daily satisfaction so long as my declining faculties are preserved."<sup>93</sup>

Wilberforce managed to "steal one moment from business and bustle" to thank him for his kind congratulations:

"O my dear sir, it is refreshing to me to turn away my eye from the vanities with which it is surrounded, and to fix it on you, who

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<sup>90</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f110, 16 June 1802, to Mrs. Wilberforce.

<sup>91</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f115, 21 February 1803.

<sup>92</sup> *Correspondence*, 302-303, 5 June 1804.

<sup>93</sup> Newton did live to see the Abolition of the Slave Trade become law in 1807, by just 9 months.

appear in some sort to be already (like Moses descending from the mount) enlightened with the beams of that blessed day which is beginning to rise on you, as you approach to the very boundaries of this world's horizon... Pray for us, my dear sir, that we also may be enabled to hold on our way and at last to join with you in the shout of victory."<sup>94</sup>

The second to last entry in the diary of the old African blasphemer, the "servant of slaves,"<sup>95</sup> written on Saturday 4 August 1804, his 79<sup>th</sup> birthday, reads, "Let me retire as a thankful guest from a full table, and rejoice that others are coming forth to serve thee (I hope better) when I can do no more."<sup>96</sup> William Bull's grandson, Josiah, asked in his biography on Newton, "And what in all this was the great secret of Mr Newton's power and steadfastness?"<sup>97</sup> He supplied the answer himself, "Unquestionably, it was his spirit of prayer." There was no question either in Wilberforce's mind as to what Newton's secret was, "O my dear Sir," he had written to him, "let not your hands cease to be lifted up, lest Amalek prevail."<sup>98</sup>

Newton had offered the young prophet "a double portion of my thoughts and prayers."<sup>99</sup> His prayer was "that the Lord may give you a

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<sup>94</sup> *Life*, vol 3, 169-170, 1804.

<sup>95</sup> Newton wrote his own epitaph, still in St Mary Woolnoth, London, with this phrase on it.

<sup>96</sup> Wed 21 March 1804, John Newton Diary, CO199, Firestone Library, Princeton University.

<sup>97</sup> *John Newton of Olney and St Mary Woolnoth*, Josiah Bull, 1868; reprinted as *But Now I See*, Banner of Truth, 1998 (page 368)

<sup>98</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f19, 6 September 1788, Wilberforce to Newton, from Rayrigg. On February 27, 1778, Newton wrote a hymn on Moses and Amalek, later published in the *Olney Hymns*, 1779, Book 1, Hymn which included these lines:

...Moses apart with lifted hands  
Engaged in humble prayer.  
When Moses' hands through weakness dropped,  
The warriors fainted too;  
Israel's success at once was stopped,  
And Am'lek bolder grew.

<sup>99</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 f 34, 10 June 1791.

double portion of his Spirit, to improve the advantages and to obviate the difficulties of your situation."<sup>100</sup> *Let me inherit a double portion*, had been Elisha's plea to the aging Elijah.<sup>101</sup> For Elisha, the condition of receiving a double portion of the older prophet's spirit was that he should see him taken up to heaven. This wasn't to be for Wilberforce.

Newton died on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1807. But on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1807, Wilberforce inexplicably had "a sudden attack of a dangerous illness,"<sup>102</sup> which put him out of circulation. On 20 December he recorded, "A good deal of pain in my side, and my breath much affected." When his doctor called on him two days later, he considered things were very serious indeed and "bled" him. Wilberforce's lungs had been inflamed. A slow recovery began. On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1808, the day after Newton's funeral, Wilberforce was still not yet well enough to go downstairs. But the entry that day in his diary read: "...oh bring my soul, more effectually than ever hitherto, to God in Christ, **and give me a large measure of Thy Spirit.**"<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> MS Wilberforce c49 ff 50-51, 19 June 1794.

<sup>101</sup> 2 Kings 2:9.

<sup>102</sup> *Life*, vol 3, 354.

<sup>103</sup> *Life*, vol 3, 355.