

THINGS THAT  
cannot  
BE SHAKEN

**HOLDING FAST TO YOUR FAITH**  
IN A RELATIVISTIC WORLD

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Glorious things of thee are spoken,  
Zion, city of our God!  
He, whose word cannot be broken,  
Form'd thee for his own abode.  
On the Rock of Ages founded,  
What can shake thy sure repose?  
With salvation's walls surrounded,  
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

See! the streams of living waters  
Springing from eternal love,  
Well supply thy sons and daughters,  
And all fear of want remove:  
Who can faint, while such a river  
Ever flows their thirst t'assuage?  
Grace, which, like the Lord, the giver,  
Never fails from age to age.

Round each habitation hovering,  
See the cloud and fire appear!  
For a glory and a covering,  
Showing that the Lord is near:

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Thus deriving from their banner  
Light by night, and shade by day;  
Safe they feed upon the manna  
Which he gives them when they pray.

Bless'd inhabitants of Zion,  
Wash'd in the Redeemer's blood!  
Jesus, whom their souls rely on,  
Makes them kings and priests to God:  
Tis his love his people raises  
Over self to reign as kings,  
And as priests his solemn praises  
Each for a thank-offering brings.

Saviour, if of Zion's city  
I through grace a member am;  
Let the world deride or pity,  
I will glory in thy name:  
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,  
All his boasted pomp and show;  
Solid joys and lasting treasure,  
None but Zion's children know.

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## Preface

There is something compelling about the life stories of people who have been radically changed by God. The “this-is-what-I-was-but-this-is-what-I-am-now” stories capture our attention. Perhaps this captivation is due to an understanding of the power of sin in our lives and the hope of the power of the gospel.

In Romans chapters 7 and 8, the apostle Paul shares his all-consuming struggle with sin. By the middle of chapter 8, Paul turns his attention to describing his hope in the work of the Holy Spirit in spite of his constant struggle with sin. This assurance of God’s redeeming work in Paul’s life is grounded in the cross of Christ. Paul’s struggle, his circumstances, do not define his position before God. His position before God is founded in the obedient life and death of Christ his Savior. At the end of Romans 8, Paul writes with certainty about the ultimate victory he will enjoy, when his life is consummated in glory. Paul’s experience, from Romans 7–8, reminds us of the “bookends” of the normal Christian life. Throughout the believer’s experience, daily circumstances lead him to cry

out with Paul, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). How sweet to be able to contemplate the truth of Jesus’ work in the middle of the struggle: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . .” (Rom. 8:35).

One of the great “this-is-what-I-was” stories is that of John Newton. His transformation from vile slave trader to Anglican minister and hymn writer is well known by now. One of his best-known hymns, “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken,” has served as the inspiration for this book. This hymn encourages believers to remember God’s protection of his people. He will never fail us. He will guide and provide for us, all because we have been “washed in the Redeemer’s blood.”

John Newton was born July 24, 1725, in London. His mother taught him the Bible but died when he was seven. His father seemed uninterested in rearing his son. Newton spent his early life as a sailor and slave trader. He was miraculously converted during a storm at sea. After his conversion, he attempted to continue in the slave trade and tried to restrain its inherent evils in his own practices. He eventually quit sailing and was ordained in the Anglican Church. Newton took a parish in the village of Olney. He later met William Cowper, a poet who had moved to Olney. Cowper’s life was marked by periods of severe depression. Newton took Cowper into his home on several occasions when it became difficult for Cowper to live alone. Newton was a pastor to Cowper, encouraging Cowper to write hymns based on his suffering and his awareness of God’s work during these difficult times in Cowper’s life. The hymns of Newton and Cowper (a collection of approximately three hundred) became known as the Olney Hymns. Some 233 of these compositions are attributed to Newton.

Newton's hymns, such as "Amazing Grace," "I Asked the Lord," and "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," contain obvious references to his own profound understanding of sin in the human heart. His appreciation for his unworthiness of God's love, as well as his gratefulness for the pardoning grace of God, finds clear expression in all his writings. It was this understanding of God's grace and his own sinfulness that led him to show such compassion to Cowper.

Newton's perception of the pervasiveness of his own sin caused the cross to be an immeasurably large factor in his life. It was said of Newton, "He believes and feels his own weakness and unworthiness and lives upon the grace and pardoning love of His Lord. This gives him an habitual tenderness and gentleness of spirit."<sup>1</sup> John Newton was a faithful husband to Mary for forty years. He died December 21, 1807, at the age of eighty-two. He continues to speak to us today through his hymns.

Hymns are alternately defined as songs of praise or spiritual songs. By definition, their purpose is to tell the story of redemption. Older hymns connect us with the past as we see how Christians from earlier generations applied the gospel to their lives in times of wandering, struggling, disappointment or joy, and celebration. Newton's hymns are rich with theology. In the preface to *The Olney Hymns*, he wrote, "The views I have received of the doctrines of grace are essential to my peace; I could not live comfortably a day or an hour without them. I likewise believe . . . them to be friendly to holiness and to have a direct influence in producing and maintaining a gospel conversation; and therefore, I must not be ashamed of them."<sup>2</sup> Newton also stated, "The scripture which teaches us what we are to say is equally explicit as to the temper and spirit in which we are to speak. Though I had knowledge of

all mysteries, and the tongue of an angel to declare them, I could hope for little acceptance or usefulness, unless I was to speak in love.”<sup>3</sup>

Newton describes the Christian life with refreshing honesty in his hymns. He does not engage in sugarcoating, sanitizing, or romanticizing the believer’s experience in an effort to communicate a pious, stoic response to daily struggles. Through his hymns, Newton speaks directly to our experience, allowing us to see his own joy and sorrow in trials and sufferings, his life of learning the reality of faith. His hymn, “I Asked the Lord,” captures this thought:

I asked the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every  
    grace,  
Might more of His salvation know and seek more earnestly  
    His face.  
’Twas He who taught me thus to pray, and He I trust has  
    answered prayer,  
But it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair.  
I hoped that in some favored hour at once He’d answer my  
    request,  
And by His love’s constraining power subdue my sins and  
    give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel the hidden evils of my  
    heart,  
And let the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every  
    part.  
Yea, more with His own hand He seemed intent to aggravate  
    my woe,  
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed, cast out my feelings,  
    laid me low.

Lord, why is this, I trembling cried, Wilt Thou pursue Thy  
    worm to death?

“’Tis in this way,” the Lord replied, “I answer prayer for grace and faith.”

“These inward trials I employ from self and pride to set thee free  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy that thou mayest seek  
thy all in me.”

These beautiful words show Christians what it means to be honest about our sin. Consequently, these hymns do not encourage Christian pretense, as if our salvation means that we are better people in and of ourselves. They do not erect barriers to unbelievers, who resent piously pretentious hypocrisy. Because these hymns are grounded in Scripture, the words transcend the sometimes popular idea that the church and God are not relevant. The poetic language both connects us to the past and speaks to our present circumstances.

Following Newton’s example, how do we love those who are suffering? What can we communicate to them with that habitual tenderness and gentleness of spirit that characterized John Newton’s love? How do we show compassion to those whose marriages are falling apart? How do we encourage parents of rebellious, difficult children? What do we say to those who are overwhelmed with the problem of too little money, or too much? Is there tenderness and compassion in our voices and attitudes when we talk to others about their sexual confusion, addiction to pornography, or chemical substances? Are we patient and loving to those who suffer from depression and disappointment, who may be victims of their own sin or the sins of others? What is the basis for the hope we can give?

What guides us and informs our answers, both for others and ourselves? “He, whose word cannot be broken,” helps

us think through the answers. How does the gospel impact the way we engage other people? “See! the streams of living waters springing from eternal love . . .”; we love others as we have been loved. How can I rest in Christ? “Safe they feed upon the manna, which he gives them when they pray . . .”; prayer brings rest and peace as we acknowledge that only Jesus can help. What does faith in Christ look like as we struggle against the power of sin? “Washed in the Redeemer’s blood . . .”; that promise gives the hope of future glory with Christ. What shapes my relationships? “Fading is the worlding’s pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show.” Genuine love is selfless, and motivated by gratitude for the redemption we have received in the Son.

As Newton’s great hymn—and the gospel truths of Scripture that lie behind it—provides the backdrop of this book, our hope is that we will, together, be encouraged to set aside those sins that cling so closely. In the midst of a world sometimes overly enamored with the new and with change, we hope that those “things that cannot be shaken” (Heb. 12:27) will become our only hope, that in the words of Newton, “solid joys and lasting treasure” will become the defining character of our walk with Christ.

# Notes

## Preface

1. Richard Cecil, “Memoirs of the Reverend John Newton,” in *The Works of the Reverend John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth), 170.

2. John Newton, *The Works of the Reverend John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth), 3:303.

3. *Ibid.*, 5:131.

## Chapter 1: Says Who? *He Whose Word Cannot Be Broken*

1. What we use as a label for these young adults—Generation X? Millennials?—is not terribly important, in part, because it is inexact, and, in part, because what we say here really applies to all of us.

2. We will use the term “ground” here as a kind of technical term and for simplicity’s sake. Historically, however, the term used in theology was *principia*, which is translated as “foundations” or “sources.” It is a term that has its roots in the Greek term *arche*, which means a beginning point, a source, or a first principle.

3. Because it was Archimedes who said, “Give me a place to stand and I will move the world.”