

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds: Christian Experience

Today is the first of four talks on the well-known hymn "*How sweet the name of Jesus sounds*". Be assured – I am not going to sing it for you! That might lead many to switch off straight away. But it's good sometimes to think carefully about the words we often sing. We can learn some important lessons about our Christian faith from them.

Our hymn was written by John Newton who is probably better known for his hymn "Amazing grace." We can appreciate both hymns better if we know something of his history. John was born in 1725 and died in 1807. His father was a sea captain; his godly mother died when John was only 7 years old and all Christian influence was gone. He was press-ganged into the Royal Navy when he was 19 years old. He became a foul-mouthed, loose living sailor and was known on board ship for his constant blasphemy. When he was 23 years old, his ship, 'The Greyhound', ran into a violent storm, so much so that it seemed the ship would sink. In desperation, John cried out to God to save him. Amazingly to John, God did just that! The storm abated and the ship just managed to limp into Ireland. After repairs, it finally arrived in Liverpool. That experience marked the beginning of John's conversion.

By now, John was heavily involved in the slave trade and captained several slaving trips, though he began to be increasingly troubled about his role as a Christian in the slave trade. When he was 30 years old, and by now married, he left the sea and obtained his first land job as Tide Surveyor in Liverpool. I've lived in Liverpool now for over 50 years though you will know in listening to me that I am not a Scouser! But I am glad that Liverpool played its part in helping John on his Christian way.

On his 33rd birthday, John told his wife he would spend the day in prayer and fasting for direction as to his future. He felt that would be as a minister in the Church of England. It wasn't until 6 years later that he was finally ordained in St. George's Church, Liverpool after having preached a 2 hour sermon. How many congregations today would be prepared to listen for so long!

Shortly afterwards, John moved to be vicar of Olney in Northamptonshire. He died in 1807. Some years ago, my wife and I stood in that same church and read the epitaph which he had chosen himself: John Newton, Clerk, born 1725, died 1807, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy...

It was while John was at Olney that he wrote over 280 hymns, including 'Amazing grace' and 'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds'. The first verse of 'Amazing grace' fittingly sums up John's spiritual history:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

But it's time now to look at our hymn, 'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds'. It surely is a demonstration of the amazing grace of God that a man, to whom for many years the name of Jesus was used simply as an oath, could pen such words. Listener, if you have never yet learned the sweetness of the name of Jesus, then learn it today as we consider the words John Newton penned about it. The grace of God in Christ can save you as certainly as it did John Newton. Then you will be able to join with the apostle Peter as he writes about the Lord Jesus, "Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious" (1 Peter 2:7).

Today we are going to look at the first two verses of our hymn:

*How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.*

*It makes the wounded spirit whole,
It calms the troubled breast;
'Tis manna to the hungry soul,
And to the weary rest.*

In these two verses, we can find five different statements about the things that the name of Jesus – a poetic description of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself – can do. We shall consider each of these in turn and see how the statements are amply confirmed in the Gospel record.

It soothes his sorrows

In John 11, Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, is seriously ill. Instinctively, the sisters send to Jesus, saying, “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick” (verse 3). In His own purposes of love, Jesus does not go to them straight away and Lazarus dies. When Jesus arrives in Bethany a few days later, we read, “Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying, ‘Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.’ Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to Him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, ‘See how He loved him’” (verses 32-36).

The Lord Jesus perfectly understood and entered into the deep sorrow of Martha and Mary. To demonstrate that He was indeed the Son of God, come in resurrection power, Jesus calls Lazarus out from the dead and restores him to his sisters. Then in chapter 12, we see Martha, Mary and Lazarus happily making a feast for Jesus.

There is a lovely incident recorded in Matthew 14. Herod had had John the Baptist put to death. What were John’s disciples to do? We read, “Then his disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus” (verse 12). I love those words, “and went and told Jesus”. That was the best thing they could do in their sorrow!

One day in 1893, a very sorrowful woman turned to EA Hoffman, a servant of God, and cried, “What shall I do?” “You cannot do better than to take all of your sorrows to Jesus. You must tell Jesus”, he replied. At that, the woman’s face lit up as she exclaimed, “Yes, I must tell Jesus.” When EA Hoffman got home, he sat down and wrote the moving hymn that begins,

*I must tell Jesus all of my trials;
I cannot bear these burdens alone;
In my distress He kindly will help me;
He ever loves and cares for His own.*

And so we, today, in our sorrows can go and tell Jesus and find that He can indeed soothe our sorrows.

Heals his wounds

We live today in a world of wounded and broken lives – not just the material wounds of high speed living, of war and destruction – but the spiritual wounds of broken homes, of drug addiction, of hopelessness. In Jesus’ day, society may have looked very different from ours, at least on the surface, but the wounds were still there, and He dealt with them. Mark tells us of one such case: “Now a certain woman had a flow of blood for twelve years, and had suffered many things from many physicians. She had spent all that she had and was no better, but rather grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came behind Him in the crowd and touched His garment; for she said, ‘If only I may touch His clothes, I shall be made well.’ Immediately the fountain of her blood was dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction” (verses 25-29). As she fell down trembling before the Lord Jesus to confess what she had done, she heard those lovely words from His lips, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction” (verse 34).

When, at the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth to read, He read from the book of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the LORD” (Luke 4:18-19). Some 600 years earlier, Isaiah, by the Spirit of God, had been moved to pen those words of the coming Messiah, words that were so completely fulfilled in the Lord Jesus. How many wounded and broken hearts then, and since then, have found healing in Him!

And drives away his fear

Mark tells us of a time when Jesus and His disciples were on Lake Galilee: “Now when they had left the multitude, they took Him along in the boat as He was...And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, ‘Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?’ Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace, be still!’ And the wind ceased and there was a great calm” (Mark 4:36-39). In the midst of a storm of such severity that seasoned fishermen feared they were going to drown, Jesus was fast asleep! How could He sleep under such conditions? In part, it may have been because He was so very tired after a day of ministering to others. But principally, I believe it was because of His absolute trust in the loving care of His Father, and there could be no fear in that! His disciples also, as they heard Jesus’ words, “Peace, be still!”, and saw the ensuing “great calm”, would certainly have had their fears driven away. Years later, His disciple John, who had gone through that storm with Him, wrote, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Today, the Lord Jesus invites us to share that same loving confidence in His Father and, in this way, He drives away our fear.

When David found himself a prisoner of the Philistines, whose champion, Goliath, he had killed some years earlier, he wrote, “Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You. In God (I will praise His word), in God I have put my trust; I will not fear. What can flesh do to me?” (Psalm 56:3-4). Ivor Smith-Cameron, an Indian-born Anglican minister, has written, “Whenever I hear about Christ as Saviour it appears that He saves us from sin – and I don’t wish to deny that – but in my experience He does more than that: He releases us from fear, and I think fear is the great killer.”

Some years ago, a competition was held for a painting that would best embody the idea of peace. Out of the many entries, in the end the choice was between two. One was a beautiful lake scene, not a ripple disturbed the surface of the lake, none of the branches in the trees surrounding the lake moved. Everything was at peace. That looked to be a certain winner. But then the second picture was displayed. By contrast, it depicted a wild storm at sea. The waves rose and fell, driven by the wind. But there, high up on the rocky cliff against which the waves crashed incessantly, was a bird sitting on its nest in the cleft of a rock. No feathers were ruffled there; the bird was at peace! That second picture won the competition.

The Lord Jesus has not given us a trouble free and fear free world in which to live. All of us, at some time or other, will encounter the storms of life. But as He whispers to our souls His own words, “Peace, be still!”, then we can indeed find that He will drive away our fears.

The first two lines of verse 2: “It makes the wounded spirit whole, And calms the troubled breast” essentially repeat what has been considered under ‘heals his wounds’ and ‘and drives away his fear’. So we come to:

’Tis manna to the hungry soul

One of the outstanding features of hymns of the 18th and 19th centuries is that they were steeped in sound biblical teaching. In part, this was because they were used as a teaching medium but also because they were addressed to people who, by and large, were familiar with their bibles. Happily today there are some good modern hymns that carry on this tradition but, sadly, they can no longer count on a good background of biblical teaching. In fact, one modern version of our hymn has changed this particular line to ‘It satisfies the hungry soul’.

The line, of course, can only be understood by reference to the provision God made for the Israelites when He brought them out of Egypt, through the wilderness, to the Promised Land. In the wilderness, God miraculously provided them with manna, (‘bread from heaven’ as God describes it to Moses) and with quails. Without this provision, the Israelites would have all perished. See Exodus 16.

As Christians, we too are on a journey – through this world on our way to heaven. This world has no spiritual food to offer that will sustain us on this journey. Only the Lord Jesus can do that!

In John 6:33, the Lord Jesus says, “The bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”. He goes on to show that not only is He the One to whom we must come to receive God’s gift of eternal life, but He is the One who alone can sustain that life. As believers on Him, we need through daily communion with Him in prayer and reading His Word, to feed on Him. Only in this way will we find the strength to follow Him.

And to the weary rest

The invitation of the Lord Jesus still holds good today: “Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

The Lord Jesus is the only one who can give rest of conscience if we come to Him confessing our sins and receiving Him as our Saviour. But He also gives rest of heart as we go through this troubled world in the assurance of His constant care over us. Peter urges us, "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

So we come to the end of these first two verses. Let's just remind ourselves of the beginning of our hymn:

*How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear.*

The blessings of which we have been speaking today are only for those of us who, like John Newton, have come to trust Christ as Saviour, as the One who died for our sins at Calvary. It's worth remembering that as John Newton's life drew to its end, he whispered to a friend at his bedside, "My memory is nearly gone, but I can still remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Saviour!"

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