One of the most remarkable things about this book is that the voice of Tony Reinke and the voice of John Newton have become almost indistinguishable. This is not because Tony fails to cite Newton or give him credit. Quotations abound. It’s because Tony has absorbed the spirit and mind of John Newton. This makes for an uninterrupted immersion into the soul of “the old African blasphemer.”

There are few immersions that would be more valuable for your soul. J. I. Packer gives part of the reason: “Ex-slavetrader John Newton was the friendliest, wisest, humblest and least pushy of all the eighteenth-century evangelical leaders, and was perhaps the greatest pastoral letter-writer of all time.” Tony has lived in those one thousand letters long enough to be the sweet aroma of this “least-pushy” of eighteenth-century giants.

True humility can take dramatically different forms from one clay pot to another. The form it took in Newton was Christ-exalting tenderness. His own experience of “amazing grace” (he wrote the song) worked its way so deeply into his soul that the log of self-justification was chopped up, and Newton became a delicate surgeon for taking specks out of many sick eyes.

And since, as Tony demonstrates, “Newton is a master craftsman of metaphors for the Christian life,” we may listen as he illustrates the way tenderness arises from the experience of grace.

A company of travellers fall into a pit: one of them gets a passenger to draw him out. Now he should not be angry with the rest for falling in; nor because they are not yet out, as he is. He did not pull himself out: instead, therefore, of reproaching them, he should show them pity. . . . A
man, truly illuminated, will no more despise others, than Bartimaeus, after his own eyes were opened, would take a stick, and beat every blind man he met.¹

So Newton is a double master: a master of tender pastoral surgery, and a master of metaphor. As Tony says, “a spiritual doctor” whose specialty is “cardiology,” and whose scalpel and sutures are Bible-saturated, image-laden words.

It is not an inconsistency to say that Newton is “a delicate surgeon for taking specks out of sin-sick eyes,” and to say his specialty is cardiology. In fact, this juxtaposition of eyes and heart points to the essence of Newton’s spiritual method of healing. The heart has eyes (Eph. 1:18). They are made for seeing Christ. But they are blind. Only God can open them. And he uses words.

Through Newton’s words and Tony’s words—one voice—God does eye surgery on the heart, so that we see Christ more fully. And more fully means seeing him as more precious. And more precious means more powerful to heal us and change us.

This is how Newton saw the Christian life: “Every step along the path of life is a battle for the Christian to keep two eyes on Christ”—the eyes of the heart. “If I may speak my own experience,” he said, “I find that to keep my eye simply upon Christ, as my peace, and my life, is by far the hardest part of my calling.”² “I approach the throne of grace encumbered with a thousand distractions of thought, each of which seems to engage more of my attention than the business I have in hand.”³

This is why Newton is such a good eye surgeon for us: he has done the work on himself first. With no formal theological education, he has studied his own soul, his own diseased eyes, until he knows us very well. As the Lord taught him how to see the Savior, he teaches us.

And that is the essence of Christian living. “To know him, is the shortest description of true grace; to know him better, is the surest mark of growth in grace; to know him perfectly, is eternal life.”⁴

The reason most of us “live so far below our privileges, and are so often

¹ W, 1:105. (Direct quotes in this book from the works of Newton have been slightly modified to conform to current American standards of spelling, punctuation, and lowercase divine pronouns. Otherwise all quotes reflect the originals. Unless otherwise indicated, italics in quotations are original to the sources cited.—TR)
² W, 6:44–45.
⁴ W, 6:73–74.
heavy and sorrowful,” is that the eyes of our hearts—the eyes of faith—do not see that “we have in him grounds of continual joy.” “The greatest happiness we are capable of,” Newton says, is our communion with Christ. “Hungering and thirsting for Christ is the central daily Christian discipline”—to see him clearly and to depend “on him for hourly supplies of wisdom, strength, and comfort.”

Newton was the tender, “least pushy” of the eighteenth-century giants because this was his experience—a tender, nearby Jesus. “Jesus is always near, about our path by day, and our bed by night; nearer than the light by which we see, or the air we breathe; nearer than we are to ourselves; so that not a thought, a sigh, or a tear, escapes his notice.”

But Newton does not sink into individualistic sentimentalism. Jesus is too great for that.

His treasury of life and salvation is inexhaustible... like the sun, which having cheered the successive generations of mankind with his beams, still shines with undiminished luster, is still the fountain of light, and has always a sufficiency to fill innumerable millions of eyes in the same instant.

This is what we long for in our day—a great awakening in which the glory of Christ fills innumerable millions of eyes. Newton was the fruit of one of those awakenings. Perhaps God may be pleased to make him a bridge from that one to the one we need.

If he blesses this book that way, it will be because of Newton’s—and Tony’s—relentless focus on the sweetness and the greatness of Christ as the Savior and Satisfier of our souls. Over this book flies the banner of John Newton: “None but Jesus.” I join Tony in praying that the readers will be many, and the testimony of each will be Newton’s own:

Then let me boast with holy Paul,
That I am nothing, Christ is all.  

John Piper