

Texts on the Wall of Newton's Study

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If you have visited John Newton's attic study in what is now the Old Vicarage at Olney, you will have seen these two texts which he kept on the wall as reminders to himself:

Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable. Isaiah 43:4

BUT

Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bond-man in the land of Egypt, and the LORD Thy God redeemed thee. Deuteronomy 15:15

Why these two verses in particular? A little light is shed on this in his diary for 1767. Lord Dartmouth had the vicarage enlarged for Newton. While the builders were on site, William Cowper and Mary Unwin arrived from Huntingdon and moved in with the Newtons at their temporary address.

On 20 October, after the Tuesday night prayer meeting, which began with an exposition from Pilgrim's Progress, Newton wrote in his diary, 'Preparing to remove to the vicarage.'

The extra activity was all too much for the ladies. The following day both Mary Newton and Mary Unwin fell ill. 'Alarmed with a double illness,' wrote John, 'my dear and Mrs U', adding, 'Enabled in some measure to put all into the Lord's hands.'

His diary continues: 'Thursday 22. Busied in setting to rights my new study. O may the Lord bless me in it. Lecture: Deuteronomy 15:15.'

This was the usual Thursday night church Bible study, or lecture, but he interrupted his series on Acts to preach from this text in Deuteronomy. Through the excitement of the provision of a newly furnished home, he still kept himself in check, meditating on his undeserved gifts... 'Thou shalt remember thou wast a bondman... and the Lord Thy God redeemed thee.'

Friday 23: Removed the family today – slept in the vicarage. It was a busy day, little time for myself in secret.

Saturday 24: Some thoughts of the Lord's goodness in settling me peaceably in my new house. Reading, writing, etc.

Sunday 25: Isaiah 43:4; Daniel 6:23. In the evening had our first meeting in the best parlour. My heart hoped for a time of liberty, but to me it seemed otherwise.

In his morning sermon on Isaiah 43:4, Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, he began, 'After mentioning the disobedience and stupidity of Israel in terms which might lead us to expect heavier judgment, we find new promises and declarations of grace. This is the Lord's usual method – he visits his people's transgressions with a rod, but it is the discovery [revealing] of his love that chiefly softens and breaks their hearts.'

An 'anniversary man', who celebrated regularly the birthdays of his wife, himself, their wedding day, his re-birth during the storm at sea and his dedication for the ministry, this move into freely-provided accommodation gave him cause for reflection and thanksgiving. The following Friday, the 30 October, he reserved 'as a solemn day of prayer to entreat the Lord's blessing on my new habitation'.

Perhaps it was as a result of this day of prayer, with his two recently preached sermons on Isaiah 43:4 and Deuteronomy 15:15 fresh in his mind, that he had these particular texts written on his attic study wall as 'markers' of the Lord's dealings with him over that past week.

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