

"The Invisible World"
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St. John Henry Newman
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"While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." 2 Cor. iv. 18.

1 THERE are two worlds, "the visible, and the invisible," as the Creed speaks,—the world
2 we see, and the world we do not see; and the world we do not see as really exists as
3 the world we do see. It really exists, though we see it not. The world we see we know to
4 exist, *because* we see it. We have but to lift up our eyes and look around us, and we
5 have proof of it: our eyes tell us. We see the sun, moon and stars, earth and sky, hills
6 and valleys, woods and plains, seas and rivers. And again, we see men, and the works
7 of men. We see cities, and stately buildings, and their inhabitants; men running to and
8 fro, and busying themselves to provide for themselves and their families, or to
9 accomplish great designs, or for the very business' sake. All that meets our eyes forms
10 one world. It is an immense world; it reaches to the stars. Thousands on thousands of
11 years might we speed up the sky, and though we were swifter than the light itself, we
12 should not reach them all. They are at distances from us greater than any that is
13 assignable. So high, so wide, so deep is the world; and yet it also comes near and close
14 to us. It is every where; and it seems to leave no room for any other world.

15 And yet in spite of this universal world which we see, there is another world, quite as
16 far-spreading, quite as close to us, and more wonderful; another world all around us,
17 though we see it not, and more wonderful than the world we see, for this reason if for no
18 other, that we do not see it. All around us are numberless objects, coming and going,
19 watching, working or waiting, which we see not: this is that other world, which the eyes
20 reach not unto, but faith only.

21 Let us dwell upon this thought. We are born into a world of sense; that is, of the real
22 things which lie round about us, one great department comes to us, accosts us, through
23 our bodily organs, our eyes, ears, and fingers. We feel, hear, and see them; and we
24 know they exist, because we do thus perceive them. Things innumerable lie about us,
25 animate and inanimate; but one particular class of these innumerable things is thus
26 brought home to us through our senses. And moreover, while they act upon us, they
27 make their presence known. We are sensible of them at the time, we are conscious that
28 we perceive them. We not only see, but know that we see them; we not only hold
29 intercourse, but know that we do. We are among men, and we know that we are. We
30 feel cold and hunger; we know what sensible things remove them. We eat, drink, clothe
31 ourselves, dwell in houses, converse and act with others, and perform the duties of
32 social life; and we feel vividly that we are doing so, while we do so. Such is our relation
33 towards one part of the innumerable beings which lie around us. They act upon us, and
34 we know it; and we act upon them in turn, and know we do.

35 But all this does not interfere with the existence of that other world which I speak of,
36 acting upon us, yet not impressing us with the consciousness that it does so. It may as
37 really be present and exert an influence as that which reveals itself to us. And that such
38 a world there is, Scripture tells us. Do you ask what it is, and what it contains? I will not
39 say that all that belongs to it is vastly more important than what we see, for among
40 things visible are our fellow-men, and nothing created is more precious and noble than
41 a son of man. But still, taking the things which we see altogether, and the things we do
42 not see altogether, the world we do not see is on the whole a much higher world than
43 that which we do see. For, first of all, He is there who is above all beings, who has
44 created all, before whom they all are as nothing, and with whom nothing can be
45 compared. Almighty God, we know, exists more really and absolutely than any of those
46 fellow-men whose existence is conveyed to us through the senses; yet we see Him not,
47 hear Him not, we do but "feel after Him," yet without finding Him. It appears, then, that
48 the things which are seen are but a part, and but a secondary part of the beings about
49 us, were it only on this ground, that God Almighty, the Being of beings, is not in their
50 number, but among "the things which are not seen." Once, and once only, for thirty-
51 three years, has He condescended to become one of the beings which are seen, when
52 he, the second Person of the Ever-blessed Trinity, was, by an unspeakable mercy, born
53 of the Virgin Mary into this sensible world. And then He was seen, heard, handled; He
54 ate, He drank, He slept, He conversed, He went about, He acted as other men; but
55 excepting this brief period, His presence has never been perceptible; He has never
56 made us conscious of His existence by means of our senses. He came, and He retired
57 beyond the veil: and to us individually, it is as if He had never showed Himself; we have
58 as little sensible experience of His presence. Yet "He liveth evermore."

59 And in that other world are the souls also of the dead. They too, when they depart
60 hence, do not cease to exist, but they retire from this visible scene of things; or, in other
61 words, they cease to act towards us and before us *through our senses*. They live as
62 they lived before; but that outward frame, through which they were able to hold
63 communion with other men, is in some way, we know not how, separated from them,
64 and dries away and shrivels up as leaves may drop off a tree. They remain, but without
65 the usual means of approach towards us, and correspondence with us. As when a man
66 loses his voice or hand, he still exists as before, but cannot any longer talk or write, or
67 otherwise hold intercourse with us; so when he loses not voice and hand only, but his
68 whole frame, or is said to die, there is nothing to show that he is gone, but we have lost
69 our means of apprehending him.

70 Again: Angels also are inhabitants of the world invisible, and concerning them much
71 more is told us than concerning the souls of the faithful departed, because the latter
72 "rest from their labours;" but the Angels are actively employed among us in the Church.
73 They are said to be "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs
74 of salvation." [Heb. i. 14.] No Christian is so humble but he has Angels to attend on him,
75 if he lives by faith and love. Though they are so great, so glorious, so pure, so
76 wonderful, that the very sight of them (if we were allowed to see them) would strike us
77 to the earth, as it did the prophet Daniel, holy and righteous as he was; yet they are our
78 "fellow-servants" and our fellow-workers, and they carefully watch over and defend even

79 the humblest of us, if we be Christ's. That they form a part of our unseen world, appears
80 from the vision seen by the patriarch Jacob. We are told that when he fled from his
81 brother Esau, "he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the
82 sun had set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and
83 lay down in that place to sleep." [Gen. xxviii. 11.] How little did he think that there was
84 any thing very wonderful in this spot! It looked like any other spot. It was a lone,
85 uncomfortable place: there was no house there: night was coming on; and he had to
86 sleep upon the bare rock. Yet how different was the truth! He saw but the world that is
87 seen; he saw not the world that is not seen; yet the world that is not seen was there. It
88 was there, though it did not at once make known its presence, but needed to be
89 supernaturally displayed to him. He saw it in his sleep. "He dreamed, and behold, a
90 ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached up to heaven; and behold, the
91 Angels of God ascending and descending on it. And behold, the Lord stood above it."
92 This was the other world. Now, let this be observed. Persons commonly speak as if the
93 other world did not exist now, but would after death. No: it exists now, though we see it
94 not. It is among us and around us. Jacob was shown this in his dream. Angels were all
95 about him, though he knew it not. And what Jacob saw in his sleep, that Elisha's servant
96 saw as if with his eyes; and the shepherds, at the time of the Nativity, not only saw, but
97 heard. They heard the voices of those blessed spirits who praise God day and night,
98 and whom we, in our lower state of being, are allowed to copy and assist.

99 We are then in a world of spirits, as well as in a world of sense, and we hold communion
100 with it, and take part in it, though we are not conscious of doing so. If this seems
101 strange to any one, let him reflect that we are undeniably taking part in a third world,
102 which we do indeed see, but about which we do not know more than about the Angelic
103 hosts,—the world of brute animals. Can any thing be more marvellous or startling,
104 unless we were used to it, than that we should have a race of beings about us whom we
105 do but see, and as little know their state, or can describe their interests, or their destiny,
106 as we can tell of the inhabitants of the sun and moon? It is indeed a very overpowering
107 thought, when we get to fix our minds on it, that we familiarly use, I may say hold
108 intercourse with creatures who are as much strangers to us, as mysterious, as if they
109 were the fabulous, unearthly beings, more powerful than man, yet his slaves, which
110 Eastern superstitions have invented. We have more real knowledge about the Angels
111 than about the brutes. They have apparently passions, habits, and a certain
112 accountableness, but all is mystery about them. We do not know whether they can sin
113 or not, whether they are under punishment, whether they are to live after this life. We
114 inflict very great sufferings on a portion of them, and they in turn, every now and then,
115 seem to retaliate upon us, as if by a wonderful law. We depend on them in various
116 important ways; we use their labour, we eat their flesh. This however relates to such of
117 them as come near us: cast your thoughts abroad on the whole number of them, large
118 and small, in vast forests, or in the water, or in the air; and then say whether the
119 presence of some countless multitudes, so various in their natures, so strange and wild
120 in their shapes, living on the earth without ascertainable object, is not as mysterious as
121 any thing which Scripture says about the Angels? Is it not plain to our senses that there
122 is a world inferior to us in the scale of beings, with which we are connected without

123 understanding what it is? and is it difficult to faith to admit the word of Scripture
124 concerning our connexion with a world superior to us?

125 When, indeed, persons feel it so difficult to conceive the existence among us of the
126 world of spirits, because they are not aware of it, they should recollect how many worlds
127 all at once are in fact contained in human society itself. We speak of the political world,
128 the scientific, the learned, the literary, the religious world; and suitably: for men are so
129 closely united with some men, and so divided from others, they have such distinct
130 objects of pursuit one from another, and such distinct principles and engagements in
131 consequence, that in one and the same place there exist together a number of circles or
132 (as they may be called) worlds, made up of invisible men, but themselves invisible,
133 unknown, nay, unintelligible to each other. Men move about in the common paths of life,
134 and look the same; but there is little community of feeling between them; each knows
135 little about what goes on in any other sphere than his own; and a stranger coming into
136 any neighbourhood would, according to his own pursuits or acquaintances, go away
137 with an utterly distinct, or a reverse impression of it, viewed as a whole. Or again, leave
138 for a while the political and commercial excitement of some large city, and take refuge in
139 a secluded village; and there, in the absence of news of the day, consider the mode of
140 life and habits of mind, the employments and views of its inhabitants; and say whether
141 the world, when regarded in its separate portions, is not more unlike itself than it is
142 unlike the world of Angels which Scripture places in the midst of it?

143 The world of spirits then, though unseen, is present; present, not future, not distant. It is
144 not above the sky, it is not beyond the grave; it is now and here; the kingdom of God is
145 among us. Of this the text speaks;—"We look," says St. Paul, "not at the things which
146 are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are
147 temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." You see he regarded it as a
148 practical truth, which was to influence our conduct. Not only does he speak of the world
149 invisible, but of the duty of "looking at" it; not only does he contrast the things of time
150 with it, but says that their belonging to time is a reason, not for looking at, but for looking
151 off them. Eternity was not distant because it reached to the future; nor the unseen state
152 without its influence on us, because it was impalpable. In like manner, he says in
153 another Epistle, "Our conversation is in heaven." And again, "God hath raised us up
154 together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." And again,
155 "Your life is hid with Christ in God." And to the same purport are St. Peter's words,
156 "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see Him not, yet believing, ye
157 rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." And again, St. Paul speaking of the
158 Apostles, "We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to Angels, and to men." And
159 again in words already quoted, he speaks of the Angels as "ministering spirits sent forth
160 to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation." [Phil. iii. 20. Eph. ii. 6. Col. iii. 3. 1
161 Pet. i. 8. 1 Cor. iv. 9. Heb. i. 14.]

162 Such is the hidden kingdom of God; and, as it is now hidden, so in due season it shall
163 be revealed. Men think that they are lords of the world, and may do as they will. They
164 think this earth their property, and its movements in their power; whereas it has other
165 lords besides them, and is the scene of a higher conflict than they are capable of

166 conceiving. It contains Christ's little ones whom they despise, and His Angels whom
167 they disbelieve; and these at length shall take possession of it and be manifested. At
168 present, "all things," to appearance, "continue as they were from the beginning of the
169 creation;" and scoffers ask, "Where is the promise of His coming?" but at the appointed
170 time there will be a "manifestation of the sons of God," and the hidden saints "shall
171 shine out as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." When the Angels appeared to the
172 shepherds, it was a sudden appearance,—"*Suddenly* there was with the Angel a
173 multitude of the heavenly host." How wonderful a sight! The night had before that
174 seemed just like any other night; as the evening on which Jacob saw the vision seemed
175 like any other evening. They were keeping watch over their sheep; they were watching
176 the night as it passed. The stars moved on,—it was midnight. They had no idea of such
177 a thing when the Angel appeared. Such are the power and virtue hidden in things which
178 are seen, and at God's will they are manifested. They were manifested for a moment to
179 Jacob, for a moment to Elisha's servant, for a moment to the shepherds. They will be
180 manifested for ever when Christ comes at the Last Day "in the glory of His Father with
181 the holy Angels." Then this world will fade away and the other world will shine forth.

182 Let these be your thoughts, my brethren, especially in the spring season, when the
183 whole face of nature is so rich and beautiful. Once only in the year, yet once, does the
184 world which we see show forth its hidden powers, and in a manner manifest itself. Then
185 the leaves come out, and the blossoms on the fruit trees, and flowers; and the grass
186 and corn spring up. There is a sudden rush and burst outwardly of that hidden life which
187 God has lodged in the material world. Well, that shows you, as by a sample, what it can
188 do at God's command, when He gives the word. This earth, which now buds forth in
189 leaves and blossoms, will one day burst forth into a new world of light and glory, in
190 which, we shall see Saints and Angels dwelling. Who would think, except from his
191 experience of former springs all through his life, who could conceive two or three
192 months before, that it was possible that the face of nature, which then seemed so
193 lifeless, should become so splendid and varied? How different is a tree, how different is
194 a prospect, when leaves are on it and off it! How unlikely it would seem, before the
195 event, that the dry and naked branches should suddenly be clothed with what is so
196 bright and so refreshing! Yet in God's good time leaves come on the trees. The season
197 may delay, but come it will at last. So it is with the coming of that Eternal Spring, for
198 which all Christians are waiting. Come it will, though it delay; yet though it tarry, let us
199 wait for it, "because it will surely come, it will not tarry." Therefore we say day by day,
200 "Thy kingdom come;" which means,—O Lord, show Thyself; manifest Thyself; Thou that
201 sittest between the cherubim, show Thyself; stir up Thy strength and come and help us.
202 The earth that we see does not satisfy us; it is but a beginning; it is but a promise of
203 something beyond it; even when it is gayest, with all its blossoms on, and shows most
204 touchingly what lies hid in it, yet it is not enough. We know much more lies hid in it than
205 we see. A world of Saints and Angels, a glorious world, the palace of God, the mountain
206 of the Lord of Hosts, the heavenly Jerusalem, the throne of God and Christ, all these
207 wonders, everlasting, all-precious, mysterious, and incomprehensible, lie hid in what we
208 see. What we see is the outward shell of an eternal kingdom; and on that kingdom we
209 fix the eyes of our faith. Shine forth, O Lord, as when on Thy nativity Thine Angels
210 visited the shepherds; let Thy glory blossom forth as bloom and foliage on the trees;

211 change with Thy mighty power this visible world into that diviner world, which as yet we
212 see not; destroy what we see, that it may pass and be transformed into what we
213 believe. Bright as is the sun, and the sky, and the clouds; green as are the leaves and
214 the fields; sweet as is the singing of the birds; we know that they are not all, and we will
215 not take up with a part for the whole. They proceed from a centre of love and goodness,
216 which is God Himself; but they are not His fulness; they speak of heaven, but they are
217 not heaven; they are but as stray beams and dim reflections of His Image; they are but
218 crumbs from the table. We are looking for the coming of the day of God, when all this
219 outward world, fair though it be, shall perish; when the heavens shall be burnt, and the
220 earth melt away. We can bear the loss, for we know it will be but the removing of a veil.
221 We know that to remove the world which is seen, will be the manifestation of the world
222 which is not seen. We know that what we see is as a screen hiding from us God and
223 Christ, and His Saints and Angels. And we earnestly desire and pray for the dissolution
224 of all that we see, from our longing after that which we do not see.

225 O blessed they indeed, who are destined for the sight of those wonders in which they
226 now stand, at which they now look, but which they do not recognize! Blessed they who
227 shall at length behold what as yet mortal eye hath not seen, and faith only enjoys!
228 Those wonderful things of the new world are even now as they shall be then. They are
229 immortal and eternal; and the souls who shall then be made conscious of them, will see
230 them in their calmness and their majesty where they ever have been. But who can
231 express the surprise and rapture which will come upon those, who then at least
232 apprehend them for the first time, and to whose perceptions they are new! Who can
233 imagine by a stretch of fancy the feelings of those who having died in faith, wake up to
234 enjoyment! The life then begun, we know, will last for ever; yet surely if memory be to us
235 then what it is now, that will be a day much to be observed unto the Lord through all the
236 ages of eternity. We may increase indeed for ever in knowledge and in love, still that
237 first waking from the dead, the day at once of our birth and our espousals, will ever be
238 endeared and hallowed in our thoughts. When we find ourselves after long rest gifted
239 with fresh powers, vigorous with the seed of eternal life within us, able to love God as
240 we wish, conscious that all trouble, sorrow, pain, anxiety, bereavement, is over for ever,
241 blessed in the full affection of those earthly friends whom we loved so poorly, and could
242 protect so feebly, while they were with us in the flesh, and above all, visited by the
243 immediate visible ineffable Presence of God Almighty, with His Only-begotten Son our
244 Lord Jesus Christ, and his Co-equal Co-eternal Spirit, that great sight in which is the
245 fulness of joy and pleasure for evermore,—what deep, incommunicable, unimaginable
246 thoughts will be then upon us! what depths will be stirred up within us! what secret
247 harmonies awakened, of which human nature seemed incapable! Earthly words are
248 indeed all worthless to minister to such high anticipations. Let us close our eyes and
249 keep silence.

250 "All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field. The grass
251 withereth, the flower fadeth, because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the
252 people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the Word of our God shall
253 stand for ever." [Isa. xl. 6-8.]