

"Difficulty of Realizing Sacred Privileges"
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St. John Henry Newman
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"This is the Day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." Psalm cxviii. 24.

1 IT is always very difficult to realize any great joy or great sorrow. We cannot realize it by
2 wishing to do so. What brings joys and sorrows of this world home to us, is their
3 circumstances and accompaniments. When a friend dies, we cannot believe him taken
4 from us at first;—we cannot believe ourselves to be in any new place when we are just
5 come to it. When we are told a thing, we assent to it, we do not doubt it, but we do not
6 feel it to be true, we do not understand it as a fact which must take up a position or
7 station in our thoughts, and must be acted from and acted towards, must be dealt
8 with as existing: that is, we do not realize it. This seems partly the reason why, when
9 Almighty God reveals Himself in Scripture to this man or that, he, on the other hand,
10 asks for some sign whereby he shall know that God has spoken. Doubtless sinful
11 infirmity sometimes mixed itself up in such questions, as in the case of Zacharias, who
12 being a Priest in the Temple, the very dwelling-place of the Living God, where, if any
13 where, Angels were present, where, if any where, God would speak, ought to have
14 needed nothing whereby to realize to himself God's power, God's superintending eye,
15 God's faithfulness towards the house of Israel and its priests. Under the same feeling,
16 though blamelessly, Gideon asked for the miracle upon the fleece. He could not bring
17 himself to believe that *he* was to be what God's Angel had declared. What? *he*, the least
18 of his father's house, and his family poor in Manasseh, how could he understand
19 that *he* was to be the greatest champion of Israel against the Midianites? Not that he
20 doubted it, for God had said it; but he could not feel, think, speak, act as if it were true. If
21 he attempted to do so, it was in an unreal way, and he spoke and acted unnaturally and
22 on a theory, on a view of things which he had mastered one minute and which was
23 gone the next. The special favour of God towards him, according to the words, "The
24 Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour!" [Judges vi. 12.] seemed like a dream, and
25 confused him. So he said "If now so it be, certain consequences flow from it; if God is
26 with me, it is the God of miracles who is with me, who can change the creature as He
27 will; may He then vouchsafe to do so! that I may have the full impression on my soul,
28 heart, and mind, of what my reason receives; that I may be familiarized to this strange
29 and overpowering Providence, that I should be raised above my brethren, and made
30 God's minister to them for good." And therefore he asked, first that the fleece might be
31 wet, then that it might be dry; not as evidence whereon to build his faith, but as a
32 manifestation impressing his imagination and heart.

33 In somewhat the same way we are told of Jacob also; "when he saw the waggons which
34 Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived." [Gen. xiv. 27.]
35 Jacob, to be sure, did doubt what his sons reported, from distrust of them; yet the mere
36 sight of the waggons did not serve to prove their veracity nearly so much, as to quiet his

37 perplexed imagination, and to reconcile it to the sudden news. That news was more
38 startling, than the reporters were untrustworthy.

39 And thus we Christians, though born in our very infancy into the kingdom of God, and
40 chosen above all other men to be heirs of heaven and witnesses to the world, and
41 though knowing and believing this truth entirely, yet have very great difficulty and pass
42 many years in learning our privilege. Not any one, of course, fully understands it;—
43 doubtless; but we have not even a fair, practical hold of it. And here we are, even on
44 this great Day, this Day of days, on which Christ arose from the dead,—here are we, on
45 this very Day as infants, lying helpless and senseless on the ground, without eyes to
46 see or heart to comprehend who we are.

47 Surely so it is: and it cannot be denied that we have much to do, very much, before we
48 rise to the understanding of our new nature and its privileges, and learn to rejoice and
49 be glad in the Day which the Lord hath made; "the eyes of our understanding being
50 enlightened, that we may know what is the hope of His calling, and what the riches of
51 the glory of His inheritance in the Saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His
52 power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of His mighty power, which He
53 wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and set Him at His own right
54 hand in the heavenly places." [Eph. i. 18-20.] Such high words as these are, alas!
55 scarcely more than mere words when spoken to us; at best, we but believe them, we do
56 not in any good measure realize them.

57 Now this insensibility or want of apprehension rises in great measure, it is scarcely
58 necessary to say, from our exceeding frailness and sinfulness. Our old nature is
59 continually exerting itself against the new; "the flesh lusteth against the Spirit." [Gal. v.
60 17.] Its desire is towards this world. This world is its food; its eyes apprehend this world.
61 Because it is what it is, it allies itself to this world. The world and the flesh form a
62 compact with each other; the one asks, and the other supplies. Therefore, in proportion
63 as it seduces us into the world's company, of course, in an equal degree, it blunts our
64 perception of that world which we do not see; it prevents our realizing it. And thus one
65 special cause of our difficulty in realizing our election into the kingdom of heaven is our
66 evil nature, which familiarizes us with this world, Satan's kingdom, and weighs on us
67 and pulls us down when we would lift up our hearts, lift them up unto the Lord. This is
68 certain: yet, besides this, there are certainly other reasons too which make it difficult for
69 us to apprehend our state, and cause us to do so but gradually; and which are not our
70 fault, but which arises out of our position and circumstances.

71 We are born almost into the fulness of Christian blessings, long before we have reason.
72 We could not apprehend them at all, and that without our own fault, when we were
73 baptized; for we were infants. As, then, we acquire reason itself but gradually, so we
74 acquire the knowledge of what we are but gradually also; and as it is no fault in us, but a
75 blessing to us, that we were baptized so early, so, from the nature of the case, and not
76 from any fault of ours, do we but slowly enter into the privileges of our baptism. So it is
77 as regards all our knowledge of ourselves and of our position in the world; we but
78 gradually gain it. At first children do not know that they are responsible beings; but by

79 degrees they not only feel that they are, but reflect on the great truth, and on what it
80 implies. Some persons recollect a time as children when it fell on them to reflect what
81 they were, whence they came, whither they tended, why they lived, what was required
82 of them. The thought fell upon them long after they had heard and spoken of God; but at
83 length they began to realize what they had heard, and they began to muse about
84 themselves. So, too, it is in matters of this world. As our minds open, we gradually
85 understand where we are in human society. We have a notion of ranks and classes, of
86 nations, of countries. We begin to see how we stand relatively to others. Thus a man
87 differs from a boy; he has a general view of things; he sees their bearings on each
88 other; he sees his own position, sees what is becoming, what is expected of him, what
89 his duty is in the community, what his rights. He understands his place in the world, and,
90 in a word, he is at home in it.

91 Alas, that while we thus grow in knowledge in matters of time and sense, yet we remain
92 children in knowledge of our heavenly privileges! St. Paul says, that whereas Christ is
93 risen, He "hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in
94 Christ Jesus." [Eph. ii. 6.] This is what we have still to learn; to know our place, position,
95 situation as "children of God, members of Christ, and inheritors of the kingdom of
96 heaven." We are risen again, and we know it not. We begin our Catechism by
97 confessing that we are risen, but it takes a long life to apprehend what we confess. We
98 are like people waking from sleep, who cannot collect their thoughts at once, or
99 understand where they are. By little and little the truth breaks upon us. Such are we in
100 the present world; sons of light, gradually waking to a knowledge of themselves. For this
101 let us meditate, let us pray, let us work,—gradually to attain to a real apprehension of
102 what we are. Thus, as time goes on, we shall gain first one thing, then another. By little
103 and little we shall give up shadows and find the substance. Waiting on God day by day,
104 we shall make progress day by day, and approach to the true and clear view of what He
105 has made us to be in Christ. Year by year we shall gain something, and each Easter, as
106 it comes, will enable us more to rejoice with heart and understanding in that great
107 salvation which Christ then accomplished.

108 This we shall find to be one great providential benefit arising from those duties which He
109 exacts of us. Our duties to God and man are not only duties done to Him, but they are
110 means of enlightening our eyes and making our faith apprehensive. Every act of
111 obedience has a tendency to strengthen our convictions about heaven. Every sacrifice
112 makes us more zealous; every self-denial makes us more devoted. This is a use, too, of
113 the observance of sacred seasons; they wean us from this world, they impress upon us
114 the reality of the world which we see not. We trust, if we thus proceed, we shall
115 understand more and more where we are. We humbly trust that, as we cleanse
116 ourselves from this world, our eyes will be enlightened to see the things which are only
117 spiritually discerned. We hope that to us will be fulfilled in due measure the words of the
118 beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." [Matt. v. 8.] We have
119 good hope, which cannot deceive us, that if we wait upon God, as the Saints have ever
120 waited, with fastings and prayers,—if we seek Him as Anna sought Him, or St. Peter at
121 Joppa, or holy Daniel before them, Christ will be manifested to us; the day will dawn,
122 and the day-star arise in our hearts. We shall see the sign of the Son of man in heaven;

123 we shall eat of the hidden manna, and possess that secret of the Lord which is with
124 those that fear Him; and, like St. Paul, we shall "know whom we have believed, and be
125 persuaded that He is able to keep that which we have committed unto Him against that
126 day." [2 Tim. i. 12.]

127 While then we feel keenly, as we ought, that we do not honour this Blessed Day with
128 that lively and earnest joy which is its due, yet let us not be discouraged, let us not
129 despond at this. We *do* feel joy; we feel more joy than we know we do. We see more of
130 the next world than we know we see. If we have duly improved the sacred season which
131 is now past; if we have in good earnest, and without trifling with ourselves, denied
132 ourselves in meat and drink, and other indulgences, according to our strength; if we
133 have been frequent in prayers according to our opportunities; it cannot be but that a
134 blessing has come upon us, and is upon us now. We may not be sensible of it, but by
135 and by we shall know it, when we look back upon it. What has already happened in our
136 past experience surely is enough to assure us of this. We know in what way we have
137 been hitherto brought to recognize so much as we do recognize of our Christian
138 blessedness; how very gradually, how silently. We may recollect, perhaps, one or other
139 striking occurrence. Perhaps, as I have said, we can put our hand, as it were, on a time
140 in our childhood, when the thought first came on us that we had relations towards other
141 beings, and they towards us, and we marvelled what we were, and why we existed.
142 Perhaps, in after life, we recollect seasons when the force of Divine truth came on us
143 more sensibly and distinctly; but for the most part it is not so. For the most part we have
144 gained truth, and made progress from truth to truth, without knowing it. We cannot tell
145 when we first held this, or first held that doctrine, which is now our joy and treasure. It is
146 "as if a man should cast seed into the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day,
147 and the seed should spring and grow up he knoweth not how ... first the blade, then the
148 ear, after that the full corn in the ear." [Mark iv. 26-28.] One may see this on all sides;
149 one may see it especially at this time. God Almighty seems at this time to be mercifully
150 leading numbers on to the full truth, as it is in Jesus (if it be not presumptuous thus to
151 speak); He is leading them on, and they do not know it themselves. They are gradually
152 modifying and changing their opinions, while they think they remain stationary. Others,
153 perhaps, see how it is with them: they do not; in due time they will. Such is God's
154 wonderful way. Jacob was at Bethel before he knew it. We, too, are in the kingdom of
155 grace without knowing it, and it is manifested in us before we are sensible of the
156 manifestation. As infants gaze around them, and yet seem to look at nothing, we too
157 see our privileges, yet do not master them. Let us pray ever, that we may know more
158 and more what we are, and that we may duly apprehend our own knowledge; in a word,
159 that we may have right feelings, and a corresponding creed.

160 And now, to conclude, for it is hardly befitting on this Day to speak much, when God has
161 done His greatest work. Let us think of it and of Him. Let us rejoice in the Day which He
162 has made, and let us be "willing in the Day of His Power." This is Easter Day. Let us say
163 this again and again to ourselves with fear and great joy. As children say to themselves,
164 "This is the spring," or "This is the sea," trying to grasp the thought, and not let it go; as
165 travellers in a foreign land say, "This is that great city," or "This is that famous building,"
166 knowing it has a long history through centuries, and vexed with themselves that they

167 know so little about it; so let us say, This is the Day of Days, the Royal Day, the Lord's
168 Day. This is the Day on which Christ arose from the dead; the Day which brought us
169 salvation. It is a Day which has made us greater than we know. It is our Day of rest, the
170 true Sabbath. Christ entered into His rest, and so do we. It brings us, in figure, through
171 the grave and gate of death to our season of refreshment in Abraham's bosom. We
172 have had enough of weariness, and dreariness, and listlessness, and sorrow, and
173 remorse. We have had enough of this troublesome world. We have had enough of its
174 noise and din. Noise is its best music. But now there is stillness; and it is a stillness that
175 speaks. We know how strange the feeling is of perfect silence after continued sound.
176 Such is our blessedness now. Calm and serene days have begun; and Christ is heard
177 in them, and His still small voice, because the world speaks not. Let us only put off the
178 world, and we put on Christ. The receding from one is an approach to the other. We
179 have now for some weeks been trying, through His grace, to unclothe ourselves of
180 earthly wants and desires. May that unclothing be unto us a clothing upon of things
181 invisible and imperishable! May we grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and
182 Saviour, season after season, year after year, till He takes to Himself, first one, then
183 another, in the order He thinks fit, to be separated from each other for a little while, to be
184 united together for ever, in the kingdom of His Father and our Father, His God and our
185 God.

186 Easter.