

1 "Obedience the Remedy for Religious Perplexity"
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3 St. John Henry Newman
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5 "Wait on the Lord, and keep His way, and He shall exalt thee to inherit the land." Psalm
6 xxxvii. 34.

7 THE Psalm from which I have taken my text, is written with a view of encouraging good
8 men who are in perplexity,—and especially perplexity concerning God's designs,
9 providence, and will. "Fret not thyself;" this is the lesson it inculcates from first to last.
10 This world is in a state of confusion. Unworthy men prosper, and are looked on as the
11 greatest men of the time. Truth and goodness are thrown into the shade; but wait
12 patiently,—peace, be still; in the end, the better side shall triumph,—the meek shall
13 inherit the earth.

14 Doubtless the Church is in great darkness and perplexity under the Christian
15 dispensation, as well as under the Jewish. Not that Christianity does not explain to us
16 the most important religious questions,—which it does to our great comfort; but that,
17 from the nature of the case, imperfect beings, as we are, must always be, on the whole,
18 in a state of darkness. Nay, the very doctrines of the New Testament themselves bring
19 with them their own peculiar difficulties; and, till we learn to quiet our minds, and to
20 school them into submission to God, we shall probably find more perplexity than
21 information even in what St. Paul calls "the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ." [2 Cor.
22 iv. 4.] Revelation was not given us to satisfy doubts, but to make us better men; and it is
23 as we become better men, that it becomes light and peace to our souls; though even to
24 the end of our lives we shall find difficulties both in it and in the world around us.

25 I will make some remarks today on the case of those who, though they are in the whole
26 honest inquirers in religion, yet are more or less in perplexity and anxiety, and so are
27 discouraged.

28 The use of difficulties to all of us in our trial in this world is obvious. Our faith is variously
29 assailed by doubts and difficulties, in order to prove its sincerity. If we really love God
30 and His Son, we shall go on in spite of opposition, even though, as in the case of the
31 Canaanitish woman, He seem to repel us. If we are not in earnest, difficulty makes us
32 turn back. This is one of the ways in which God separates the corn from the chaff,
33 gradually gathering each, as time goes on, into its own heap, till the end comes, when
34 "He will gather the wheat into His garner, but the chaff He will burn with fire
35 unquenchable." [Luke iii. 17.]

36 Now, I am aware that to some persons it may sound strange to speak of *difficulties* in
37 religion, for they find none at all. But though it is true, that the earlier we begin to seek
38 God in earnest, the less of difficulty and perplexity we are likely to endure, yet this
39 ignorance of religious difficulties in a great many cases, I fear, arises from ignorance of
40 religion itself. When our hearts are not in our work, and we are but carried on with the

41 stream of the world, continuing in the Church because we find ourselves there,
42 observing religious ordinances merely because we are used to them, and professing to
43 be Christians because others do, it is not to be expected that we should know what it is
44 to feel ourselves wrong, and unable to get right,—to feel doubt, anxiety, disappointment,
45 discontent; whereas, when our minds are awakened, and we see that there is a right
46 way and a wrong way, and that we have much to learn, when we try to gain religious
47 knowledge from Scripture, and to apply it to our selves, then from time to time we are
48 troubled with doubts and misgivings, and are oppressed with gloom.

49 To all those who are perplexed in any way soever, who wish for light but cannot find it,
50 one precept must be given,—*obey*. It is obedience which brings a man into the right
51 path; it is obedience keeps him there and strengthens him in it. Under all circumstances,
52 whatever be the cause of his distress,—*obey*. In the words of the text, "Wait on the
53 Lord, and keep His way, and He shall exalt thee."

54 Let us apply this exhortation to the case of those who have but lately taken up the
55 subject of religion at all. Every science has its difficulties at first; why then should the
56 science of living well be without them? When the subject of religion is new to us, it is
57 strange. We have heard truths all our lives without feeling them duly; at length, when
58 they affect us, we cannot believe them to be the same we have long known. We are
59 thrown out of our fixed notions of things; an embarrassment ensues; a general painful
60 uncertainty. We say, "Is the Bible true? Is it possible?" and are distressed by evil
61 doubts, which we can hardly explain to ourselves, much less to others. No one can help
62 us. And the relative importance of present objects is so altered from what it was, that we
63 can scarcely form any judgment upon them, or when we attempt it, we form a wrong
64 judgment. Our eyes do not accommodate themselves to the various distances of the
65 objects before us, and are dazzled; or like the blind man restored to sight, we "see men
66 as trees, walking." [Mark viii. 24.] Moreover, our judgment of persons, as well as of
67 things, is changed; and, if not every where changed, yet at first every where suspected
68 by ourselves. And this general distrust of ourselves is the greater the longer we have
69 been already living in inattention to sacred subjects, and the more we now are humbled
70 and ashamed of ourselves. And it leads us to take up with the first religious guide who
71 offers himself to us, whatever be his real fitness for the office.

72 To these agitations of mind about what is truth and what is error, is added an anxiety
73 about ourselves, which, however sincere, is apt to lead us wrong. We do not feel, think,
74 and act as religiously as we could wish; and while we are sorry for it, we are also
75 (perhaps) somewhat *surprised* at it, and impatient at it,—which is natural but
76 unreasonable. Instead of reflecting that we are just setting about our recovery from a
77 most serious disease of long standing, we conceive we ought to be able to trace the
78 course of our recovery by a sensible improvement. This same impatience is seen in
79 persons who are recovering from bodily indisposition. They gain strength slowly, and
80 are better perhaps for some days, and then worse again; and a slight relapse dispirits
81 them. In the same way, when we begin to seek God in earnest, we are apt, not only to
82 be humbled (which we ought to be), but to be discouraged at the slowness with which
83 we are able to amend, in spite of all the assistances of God's grace. Forgetting that our

84 proper title at very best is that of penitent sinners, we seek to rise all at once into the
85 blessedness of the sons of God. This impatience leads us to misuse the purpose of self-
86 examination; which is principally intended to inform us of our sins, whereas we are
87 disappointed if it does not at once tell us of our improvement. Doubtless, in a length of
88 time we shall be conscious of improvement too, but the object of ordinary self-
89 examination is to find out whether we are in earnest, and again, what we have done
90 wrong, in order that we may pray for pardon, and do better. Further, reading in Scripture
91 how exalted the thoughts and spirit of Christians should be, we are apt to forget that a
92 Christian spirit is the growth of time; and that we cannot force it upon our minds,
93 however desirable and necessary it may be to possess it; that by giving utterance to
94 religious sentiments we do not become religious, rather the reverse; whereas, if we
95 strove to obey God's will in all things, we actually should be gradually training our hearts
96 into the fulness of a Christian spirit. But not understanding this, men are led to speak
97 much and expressly upon sacred subjects, as if it were a duty to do so, and in the hope
98 of its making them better; and they measure their advance in faith and holiness, not by
99 their power of obeying God in practice, mastering their wills, and becoming more exact
100 in their daily duties, but by the warmth and energy of their religious feelings. And, when
101 they cannot sustain these to that height which they consider almost the characteristic of
102 a true Christian, then they are discouraged, and tempted to despair. Added to this,
103 sometimes their old sins, reviving from the slumber into which they have been cast for a
104 time, rush over their minds, and seem prepared to take them captive. They cry to God
105 for aid, but He seems not to hear them, and they know not which way to look for safety.

106 Now such persons must be reminded first of all, of the greatness of the work which they
107 have undertaken, viz. the sanctification of their souls. Those, indeed, who think this an
108 easy task, or (which comes to the same thing) who think that, though hard in itself, it will
109 be easy to them, for God's grace will take all the toil of it from them, such men of course
110 must be disappointed on finding by experience the force of their original evil nature, and
111 the extreme slowness with which even a Christian is able to improve it. And it is to be
112 feared that this disappointment in some cases issues in a belief that it is *impossible* to
113 overcome our evil selves; that bad we are, bad we must be; that our innate corruption
114 lies like a load in our hearts, and no more admits of improvement than a stone does of
115 light and thought; and, in consequence, that all we have to do, is to believe in Christ
116 who is to save us, and to dwell on the thoughts of His perfect work for us,—that this is
117 all we can do,—and that it is presumption as well as folly to attempt more.

118 But what says the text? "Wait on the Lord and keep His way." And Isaiah? "They that
119 wait upon the Lord shall *renew* their strength; they shall mount up with wings like
120 eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." [Isa. xl. 31.]
121 And St. Paul? "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." [Phil. iv. 13.]
122 The very fruit of Christ's passion was the gift of the Holy Spirit, which was to enable us
123 to do what otherwise we could not do—"to *work out our own salvation*." [Phil. ii. 12.]—
124 Yet, while we must aim at this, and feel convinced of our ability to do it at length through
125 the gifts bestowed on us, we cannot do it rightly without a deep settled conviction of the
126 exceeding difficulty of the work. That is, not only shall we be tempted to negligence, but
127 to impatience also, and thence into all kinds of unlawful treatments of the soul, if we be

128 possessed by a notion that religious discipline soon becomes easy to the believer, and
129 that the heart is speedily changed. Christ's "yoke is easy:" [Matt. xi. 30.] true, to those
130 who are accustomed to it, not to the unbroken neck. "Wisdom is very unpleasant to the
131 unlearned (says the son of Sirach), he that is without understanding will not remain with
132 her." "At the first she will walk with him by crooked ways, and bring fear and dread upon
133 him, and torment him with her discipline, until she may trust his soul and try him by her
134 laws. Then will she return the straight way unto him, and comfort him, and show him her
135 secrets." [Ecclus. vi. 20; iv. 17, 18.]

136 Let, then, every beginner make up his mind to suffer disquiet and perplexity. He cannot
137 complain that it should be so; and though he should be deeply ashamed of himself that
138 it is so (for had he followed God from a child, his condition would have been far
139 different, though, even then perhaps, not without some perplexities), still he has no
140 cause to be surprised or discouraged. The more he makes up his mind manfully to bear
141 doubt, struggle against it, and meekly to do God's will all through it, the sooner this
142 unsettled state of mind will cease, and order will rise out of confusion. "Wait on the
143 Lord," this is the rule; "keep His way," this is the manner of waiting. Go about your duty;
144 mind little things as well as great. Do not pause, and say, "I am as I was; day after day
145 passes, and still no light;" go on. It is very painful to be haunted by wandering doubts, to
146 have thoughts shoot across the mind about the reality of religion altogether, or of this or
147 that particular doctrine of it, or about the correctness of one's own faith, and the safety
148 of one's own state. But it must be right to serve God; we have a voice within us
149 answering to the injunction in the text, of waiting on Him and keeping His way. David
150 confesses it. "When Thou saidst, Seek ye My face; my heart said unto Thee, Thy face,
151 Lord, will I seek." [Ps. xxvii. 8.]—And surely such obedient waiting upon Him will obtain
152 His blessing. "*Blessed* are they that keep His commandments." And besides this
153 express promise, even if we had to seek for a way to understand His perfect will, could
154 we conceive one of greater promise than that of beginning with little things, and so
155 gradually making progress? In all other things is not this the way to perfection? Does
156 not a child learn to walk short distances at first? Who would attempt to bear great
157 weights before he had succeeded with the lesser? It is from God's great goodness that
158 our daily constant duty is placed in the performance of small and comparatively easy
159 services. To be dutiful and obedient in ordinary matters, to speak the truth, to be honest,
160 to be sober, to keep from sinful words and thoughts, to be kind and forgiving,—and all
161 this for our Saviour's sake,—let us attempt *these* duties first. *They* even will be
162 difficult,—the least of them; still they are much easier than the solution of the doubts
163 which harass us, and they will by degrees give us a practical knowledge of the Truth.

164 To take one instance, out of many which might be given: suppose we have any
165 perplexing, indescribable doubts about the Divine power of our Blessed Lord, or
166 concerning the doctrine of the Trinity; well, let us leave the subject and turn to do God's
167 will. If we do this in faith and humility, we shall in time find that, while we have been
168 obeying our Saviour's precepts, and imitating His conduct in the Gospels, our difficulties
169 have been removed, though it may take time to remove them; and though we are not,
170 during the time, sensible of what is going on. There may, indeed, be cases in which they
171 are never removed entirely,—and in which doubtless some great and good object is

172 secured by the trial; but we may fairly and safely look out for a more comfortable issue.
173 And so as regards all our difficulties. "Wait on the Lord, and keep His way." His word is
174 sure; we may safely trust it. We shall gain light as to general doctrines by embodying
175 them in those particular instances in which they become ordinary duties. But it too often
176 happens, that from one cause or other men do not pursue this simple method of
177 gradually extricating themselves from error.—They seek some new path which
178 promises to be shorter and easier than the lowly and the circuitous way of obedience.
179 They wish to arrive at the heights of Mount Zion without winding round its base; and at
180 first (it must be confessed) they seem to make greater progress than those who are
181 content to wait, and work righteousness. Impatient of "sitting in darkness, and having no
182 light," and of completing the Prophet's picture of a saint in trouble, "by fearing the Lord,
183 and obeying the voice of His servant," [Isa. i. 10.] they expect to gain speedy peace and
184 holiness by means of new teachers, and by a new doctrine.

185 Many are misled by confidence in themselves. They look back at the first seasons of
186 their repentance and conversion, as if the time of their greatest knowledge; and instead
187 of considering that their earliest religious notions were probably the most confused and
188 mixed with error, and therefore endeavouring to separate the good from the bad, they
189 consecrate all they then felt as a standard of doctrine to which they are bound to
190 appeal; and as to the opinion of others, they think little of it, for religion being a new
191 subject to themselves, they are easily led to think it must be a new and untried subject
192 to others also, especially, since the best men are often the least willing to converse,
193 except in private, on religious subjects, and still more averse to speak of them to those
194 who they think will not value them rightly.

195 But, leaving the mention of those who err from self-confidence, I would rather lament
196 over such as are led away from the path of plain simple obedience by a compliance with
197 the views and wishes of those around them. Such persons there are all through the
198 Church, and ever have been. Such perhaps have been many Christians in the
199 communion of the Church of Rome; who, feeling deeply the necessity of a religious life,
200 yet strive by means different from those which God has blessed, to gain His favour.
201 They begin religion at the very end of it, and make those observances and rules the
202 chief means of pleasing Him, which in fact should be but the spontaneous acts of the
203 formed Christian temper. And others among ourselves are bound by a similar yoke of
204 bondage, though it be more speciously disguised, when they subject their minds to
205 certain unscriptural rules, and fancy they must separate in some self-devised way from
206 the world, and that they must speak and act according to some arbitrary and novel form
207 of doctrine, which they try to set before themselves, instead of endeavouring to imbue
208 their hearts with that free, unconstrained spirit of devotion, which lowly obedience in
209 ordinary matters would imperceptibly form within them. How many are there, more or
210 less such, who love the Truth, and would fain do God's will, who yet are led aside and
211 walk in bondage, while they are promised superior light and freedom! They desire to be
212 living members of the Church, and they anxiously seek out whatever they can admire in
213 the true sons of the Church; but they feel forced to measure every thing by a certain
214 superstitious standard which they revere,—they are frightened at shadows,—and thus
215 they are, from time to time, embarrassed and perplexed, whenever, that is, they cannot

216 reconcile the conduct and lives of those who are really, and whom they wish to believe
217 eminent Christians, with that false religious system which they have adopted.

218 Before concluding, I must notice one other state of mind in which the precept of "waiting
219 on God and keeping His way," will avail, above all others, to lead right a doubting and
220 perplexed mind.

221 It sometimes happens, from ill health or other cause, that persons fall into religious
222 despondency. They fancy that they have so abused God's mercy that there is no hope
223 for them; that once they knew the Truth, but that now it is withdrawn from them; that
224 they have had warnings which they have neglected, and now they are left by the Holy
225 Spirit, and given over to Satan. Then, they recollect divers passages of Scripture, which
226 speak of the peril of falling away, and they apply these to their own case. Now I speak
227 of such instances, only so far as they can be called ailments of the mind, —for often
228 they must be treated as ailments of the body. As far as they are mental, let us observe
229 how it will conduce to restore the quiet of the mind, to attend to the humble ordinary
230 duties of our station, that walking in God's way, of which the text speaks. Sometimes,
231 indeed, persons thus afflicted increase their disorder by attempting to console
232 themselves by those elevated Christian doctrines which St. Paul enlarges on; and
233 others encourage them in it. But St. Paul's doctrine is not intended for weak and
234 unstable minds [Note]. He says himself: "We speak wisdom among them that *are*
235 *perfect*;" not to those who are (what he calls) "babes in Christ." [1 Cor. ii. 6; iii. 1.] In
236 proportion as we gain strength, we shall be able to understand and profit by the full
237 promises of the Christian covenant; but those who are confused, agitated, restless in
238 their minds, who busy themselves with many thoughts, and are overwhelmed with
239 conflicting feelings, such persons are, in general, made more restless and more
240 unhappy (as the experience of sick beds may show us), by holding out to them
241 doctrines and assurances which they cannot rightly apprehend. Now, not to speak of
242 that peculiar blessing which is promised to obedience to God's will, let us observe how
243 well it is calculated, by its natural effect, to soothe and calm the mind. When we set
244 about to obey God, in the ordinary businesses of daily life, we are at once interested by
245 realities which withdraw our minds from vague fears and uncertain indefinite surmises
246 about the future. Without laying aside the thoughts of Christ (the contrary), still we learn
247 to view Him in His tranquil providence, before we set about contemplating His greater
248 works, and we are saved from taking an unchristian thought for the morrow, while we
249 are busied in present services. Thus our Saviour gradually discloses Himself to the
250 troubled mind; not as He is in heaven, as when He struck down Saul to the ground, but
251 as He was in the days of His flesh, eating and conversing among His brethren, and
252 bidding us, in imitation of Him, think no duty beneath the notice of those who sincerely
253 wish to please God.

254 Such afflicted inquirers, then, after truth, must be exhorted to keep a guard upon their
255 feelings, and to control their hearts. They say they are terrified lest they should be past
256 hope; and they will not be persuaded that God is all-merciful, in spite of all the
257 Scriptures say to that effect. Well, then, I would take them on their own ground.
258 Supposing their state to be as wretched as is conceivable, can they deny it is their

259 duty *now* to serve God? Can they do better than try to serve Him? Job said, "Though He
260 slay me, yet will I trust in Him." [Job xiii. 15.] They say they do not *wish* to serve God,—
261 that they want a heart to serve Him. Let us grant (if they will have it so), that they are
262 most obdurate; still they are alive,—they must be doing something, and can they do
263 aught better than try to quiet themselves, and be resigned, and to do right rather than
264 wrong, even though they are persuaded that it does not come from their heart, and is
265 not acceptable to God? They say they dare not ask for God's grace to assist them. This
266 is doubtless a miserable state: still, since they must act in some way, though they
267 cannot do what is really good without His grace, yet, at least, let them do what seems
268 like truth and goodness. Nay, though it is shocking to set before their minds such a
269 prospect, yet even were they already in the place of punishment, will they not confess, it
270 would be the best thing they could do, to commit then as little sin as possible? Much
271 more, then, *now*, when, even if they have no hope, their heart at least is not so entirely
272 hardened as it will be then.

273 It must not be for an instant supposed I am admitting the possibility of a person being
274 rejected by God, who has any such right feelings in his mind. The anxiety of the
275 sufferers I have been describing, shows they are still under the influence of Divine
276 grace, though they will not allow it; but I say this, to give another instance in which a
277 determination to obey God's will strictly in ordinary matters tends, through His blessing,
278 to calm and comfort the mind, and to bring it out of perplexity into the clear day.

279 And so in various other cases which might be recounted. Whatever our difficulty be, this
280 is plain. "Wait on the Lord, and keep His way, and He shall exalt thee." Or in our
281 Saviour's words: "He that hath My commandments and keepeth them, he it is that
282 loveth Me; and he that loveth Me, shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him, and
283 will manifest Myself to him." "Whosoever shall do and teach these least
284 commandments, shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." "Whosoever hath, to
285 him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance." [John xiv. 21. Matt. v. 19; xiii.
286 12.]

287 Note

288 2 Pet. iii. 16.