

1 "The Infinitude of Divine Attributes"
2 *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* sermon 15
3 St. John Henry Newman
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5

6 WE all know well, and firmly hold, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on
7 the Cross in satisfaction for our sins. This truth is the great foundation of all our hopes,
8 and the object of our most earnest faith and most loving worship. And yet, however well
9 we know it, it is a subject which admits of drawing out, and insisting on in detail, in a
10 way which most persons will feel profitable to themselves. I shall now attempt to do this
11 in some measure, and to follow the reflections to which it leads; though at this season
12 many words would be out of place.

13 Christ died for our sins, for the sins of the whole world; but He need not have died, for
14 the Almighty God might have saved us all, might have saved the whole world, without
15 His dying. He might have pardoned and brought to heaven every individual child of
16 Adam without the incarnation and death of His Son. He might have saved us without
17 any ransom and without any delay. He might have abolished original sin, and restored
18 Adam at once. His word had been enough; with Him to say is to do. "All things are
19 possible to Thee," was the very reason our Lord gave in His agony for asking that the
20 chalice might pass from Him. As in the beginning He said, "Let light be, and light was";
21 so might He have spoken again, and sin would have vanished from the soul, and guilt
22 with it. Or He might have employed a mediator less powerful than His own Son; He
23 might have accepted the imperfect satisfaction of some mere man. He wants not for
24 resources; but He willed otherwise. He who ever does the best, saw in His infinite
25 wisdom that it was expedient and fitting to take a ransom. As He has not hindered the
26 reprobate from resisting His grace and rejecting redemption, so He has not pardoned
27 any who are to enter His eternal kingdom, without a true and sufficient satisfaction for
28 their sin. Both in the one case and the other, He has done, not what was possible
29 merely, but what was best. And this is why the coming of the Word was necessary; for if
30 a true satisfaction was to be made, then nothing could accomplish this, short of the
31 incarnation of the All-holy.

32 You see, then, my brethren, how voluntary was the mission and death of our Lord; if an
33 instance can be imagined of voluntary suffering, it is this. He came to die when He need
34 not have died; He died to satisfy for what might have been pardoned without
35 satisfaction; He paid a price which need not have been asked, nay, which needed to be
36 accepted when paid. It may be said with truth, that, rigorously speaking, one being can
37 never, by his own suffering, simply discharge the debt of another's sin. Accordingly, He
38 died, not in order to exert a peremptory claim on the Divine justice, if I may so speak,—
39 as if He were bargaining in the market-place, or pursuing a plea in a court of law,—but
40 in a more loving, generous, munificent way, did He shed that blood, which was worth
41 ten thousand lives of men, worth more than the blood of all the sons of Adam poured
42 out together, in accordance with His Father's will, who, for wise reasons unrevealed,
43 exacted it as the condition of their pardon.

44 Nor was this all;—one drop of His blood had been sufficient to satisfy for our sins; He
45 might have offered His circumcision as an atonement, and it would have been sufficient;
46 one moment of His agony of blood had been sufficient, one stroke of the scourge might
47 have wrought a sufficient satisfaction. But neither circumcision, agony, nor scourging
48 was our redemption, because He did not offer them as such. The price He paid was
49 nothing short of the whole treasure of His blood, poured forth to the last drop from His
50 veins and sacred heart. He shed His whole life for us; He left Himself empty of His all.
51 He left His throne on high; He gave up His home on earth; He parted with His Mother,
52 He gave His strength and His toil, He gave His body and soul, He offered up His
53 passion, His crucifixion, and His death that man should not be bought for nothing. This
54 is what the apostle intimates in saying that we are "bought with a *great price*"; and the
55 prophet, while he declares that "with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him a *copious*" or
56 "plenteous redemption".

57 This is what I wished to draw out distinctly, my brethren, for your devout meditation. We
58 might have been pardoned without the humiliation of the Eternal Word; again, we might
59 have been redeemed by one single drop of His blood; but still on earth He came, and a
60 death He died, a death of inconceivable suffering; and all this He did as a free offering
61 to His Father, not as forcing His acceptance of it. From beginning to the end it was in
62 the highest sense a voluntary work; and this is what is so overpowering to the mind in
63 the thought of it. It is as if He delighted in having to suffer; as if He wished to show all
64 creatures, what would otherwise have seemed impossible, that the Creator could
65 practise, in the midst of His heavenly blessedness, the virtues of a creature, self-
66 abasement and humility. It is, as if He wished, all-glorious as He was from all eternity,
67 as a sort of addition (if we may so speak) to His perfections, to submit to a creature's
68 condition in its most afflictive form. It is, if we may use human language, a prodigality of
69 charity, or that heroic love of toil and hardship, which is poorly shadowed out in the
70 romantic defenders of the innocent or the oppressed, whom we read of in history or in
71 fable, who have gone about the earth, nobly exposing themselves to peril for any who
72 asked their aid.

73 Or, rather, and that is what I wish to insist upon, it suggests to us, as by a specimen, the
74 infinitude of God. We all confess that He is infinite; He has an infinite number of
75 perfections, and He is infinite in each of them. This we shall confess at once; but, we
76 ask, what is infinity? what is meant by saying He is infinite? We seem to wish to be told,
77 as if we had nothing given us to throw light on the question. Why, my brethren, we have
78 much given us; the outward exhibition of infinitude is mystery; and the mysteries of
79 nature and of grace are nothing else than the mode in which His infinitude encounters
80 us and is brought home to our minds. Men confess that He is infinite, yet they start and
81 object, as soon as His infinitude comes in contact with their imagination and acts upon
82 their reason. They cannot bear the fulness, the superabundance, the inexhaustible
83 flowing forth, and "vehement rushing," and encompassing flood of the Divine attributes.
84 They restrain and limit them to their own comprehension, they measure them by their
85 own standard, they fashion them by their own model: and when they discern aught of
86 the unfathomable depth, the immensity, of any single excellence or perfection of the

87 Divine Nature, His love or His justice, or His power, they are at once offended, and turn
88 away, and refuse to believe.

89 Now this instance of our Lord's humiliation is a case in point. What would be profusion
90 and extravagance in man, is but suitable or necessary, if I may say so, in Him whose
91 resources are illimitable. We read in history accounts of oriental munificence, which
92 sound like fiction, and which would gain, not applause, but contempt in Europe, where
93 wealth is not concentrated, as in the East, upon a few out of a whole people. "Royal
94 munificence" has become a proverb, from the idea that a king's treasures are such, as
95 to make the giving of large presents and bounties, not allowable only, but appropriate in
96 him. He, then, who is infinite, may be only doing what is best, and holiest, and wisest, in
97 doing what to man seems infinitely to exceed the necessity; for He cannot exceed His
98 own powers or resources. Man has limited means and definite duties; it would be waste
99 in him to lavish a thousand pieces of gold on one poor man, when with the same he
100 might have done substantial good to many; but God is as rich, as He is profound and
101 vast, as infinite, after He has done a work of infinite bounty, as before He set about it.
102 "Knowest thou not," He says, or "hast thou not heard? the Lord is the Everlasting God,
103 who has created the ends of the earth; He shall not faint, nor weary; nor is there any
104 searching out of His wisdom." He cannot do a small work; He cannot act by halves; He
105 ever does whole works, great works. Had Christ been incarnate for one single soul, who
106 ought to have been surprised? who ought not to have praised and blessed Him for
107 telling us in one instance, and by a specimen, what that love and bounty are which fill
108 the heavens? and in like manner, when in fact He has taken flesh for those, who might
109 have been saved without it, though more suitably to His glorious majesty with it, and
110 moreover has shed His whole blood in satisfaction, when a drop might have sufficed,
111 shall we think such teaching strange and hard to receive, and not rather consider it
112 consistent and merely consistent, with that great truth, which we all start with admitting,
113 that He is infinite? Surely it would be most irrational in us, to admit His infinitude in the
114 general, and to reject the examples of it in particular; to maintain that He is mystery, yet
115 to deny that His acts can be mysterious.

116 We must not, then, bring in our economical theories, borrowed from the schools of the
117 day, when we would reason about the Eternal God. The world is ever doing so, when it
118 speaks of religion. It will not allow the miracles of the saints, because it pretends that
119 those wrought by the apostles were sufficient for the purpose which miracles had, or
120 ought forsooth to have, in view. I wonder how the world comes to admit that such
121 multitudes of human beings are born and die in infancy; or that a profusion of seeds is
122 cast over the face of the earth, some of which fall by the way-side, some on the rock,
123 some among thorns, and only a remnant on the good ground. How wasteful was that
124 sower! so thinks the world, but an apostle cries out, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the
125 wisdom and of the knowledge of God! how incomprehensible are His judgments, and
126 how unsearchable His ways!"

127 The world judges of God's condescension as it judges of His bounty. We know from
128 Scripture that "the teaching of the Cross" was in the beginning "foolishness" to it; grave,
129 thinking men scoffed at it as impossible, that God, who is so high, should humble

130 Himself so low, and that One who died a malefactor's death should be worshipped on
131 the very instrument of His punishment. Voluntary humiliation they did not understand
132 then, nor do they now. They do not indeed express their repugnance to the doctrine so
133 openly now, because what is called public opinion does not allow them; but you see
134 what they really think of Christ, by the tone which they adopt towards those who in their
135 measure follow Him. Those who are partakers of His fulness are called on, according as
136 the gift is given them, whether by His ordinary suggestions or by particular inspiration, to
137 imitate His pattern; they are carried on to the sacrifice of self, and thus they come into
138 collision with the maxims of the world. A voluntary or gratuitous mortification in one
139 shape or another, voluntary chastity, voluntary poverty, voluntary obedience, vows of
140 perfection, all this is the very point of contest between the world and the Church, the
141 world hating it, and the Church counselling it. "Why cannot they stop with me?" says the
142 world; "why will they give up their station or position, when it is certain they might be
143 saved where they are? Here is a lady of birth; she might be useful at home, she might
144 marry well, she might be an ornament to society, she might give her countenance to
145 religious objects, and she has perversely left us all; she has cut off her hair, and put on
146 a coarse garment, and is washing the feet of the poor. There is a man of name and
147 ability, who has thrown himself out of his sphere of influence and secular position, and
148 he chooses a place where no one knows his worth; and he is teaching little children
149 their catechism." The world is touched with pity, and shame, and indignation at the
150 sight, and moralises over persons who act so unworthily of their birth or education, and
151 are so cruel towards themselves. And worse still, "here is a saint, and what must he do
152 but practise eccentricities?"—as they really would be in others, though in him they are
153 but the necessary antagonists to the temptations which otherwise would come on him
154 from "the greatness of the revelations," or are but tokens of the love with which he
155 embraces the feet of His Redeemer. And "here again is another, and she submits her
156 flesh to penances shocking to think of, and wearies herself out in the search after
157 misery, and all from some notion that she is assimilating her condition to the voluntary
158 self-abasement of the Word". Alas, for the world! which is simply forgetful that God is
159 great in all He does, great in His sufferings, and that He makes saints and holy men in
160 their degree partakers of that greatness.

161 Here, too, is another instance in point. If there is one Divine attribute rather than
162 another, which forces itself upon the mind from the contemplation of the material world,
163 it is the glory, harmony, and beauty of its Creator. This lies on the surface of the
164 creation, like light on a countenance, and addresses itself to all. To few men indeed is it
165 given to penetrate into the world's system and order so deeply, as to perceive, in
166 addition, the wonderful skill and goodness of the Divine Artificer; but the grace and
167 loveliness which beam from the very face of the visible creation are cognisable by all,
168 rich and poor, learned and ignorant. It is indeed so beautiful, that those same
169 philosophers, who devote themselves to its investigation, come to love it idolatrously,
170 and to think it too perfect for them to allow of its infringement or alteration, or to tolerate
171 even that idea. Not looking up to the Infinite Creator, who could make a thousand fairer
172 worlds, and who has made the fairest portion of this the most perishable—blossoming, as
173 it does, today, and tomorrow is cast into the oven—loving, I say, the creature more than
174 the Creator, they have taken on them in all ages to disbelieve the possibility of

175 interruptions of physical order, and have denied the miracles of Revelation. They have
176 denied the miracles of apostles and prophets, on the ground of their marring and
177 spoiling what is so perfect and harmonious, as if the visible world were some work of
178 human art, too exquisite to be wantonly dashed on the ground. But He, my brethren, the
179 Eternal Maker of time and space, of matter and sense, as if to pour contempt upon the
180 forward and minute speculations of His ignorant creatures about His works and His will,
181 in order to a fuller and richer harmony, and a higher and nobler order, confuses the laws
182 of this physical universe and untunes the music of the spheres. Nay, He has done more,
183 He has gone further still; out of the infinitude of His greatness, He has defaced His own
184 glory, and wounded and deformed His own beauty—not indeed as it is in itself, for He is
185 ever the same, transcendently perfect and unchangeable, but in the contemplation of
186 His creatures,—by the unutterable condescension of His incarnation.

187 *Semetipsum exinanivit*, "He made Himself void or empty," as the earth had been "void
188 and empty" at the beginning; He seemed to be unbinding and letting loose the
189 assemblage of attributes which made Him God, and to be destroying the idea which He
190 Himself had implanted in our minds. The God of miracles did the most awful of signs
191 and wonders, by revoking and contradicting, as it were, all His perfections, though He
192 remained the while one and the same. Omnipotence became an abject; the Life
193 became a leper; the first and only Fair came down to us with an "inglorious visage," and
194 an "unsightly form," bleeding and (I may say) ghastly, lifted up in nakedness and
195 stretched out in dislocation before the eyes of sinners. Not content with this, He
196 perpetuates the history of His humiliation; men of this world, when they fall into trouble,
197 and then recover themselves, hide the memorials of it. They conceal their misfortunes in
198 prospect, as long as they can; bear them perforce, when they fall into them; and, when
199 they have overcome them, affect to make light of them. Kings of the earth, when they
200 have rid themselves of their temporary conquerors, and are reinstated on their thrones,
201 put all things back into their former state, and remove from their palaces, council-rooms,
202 and cities, whether statue or picture or inscription or edict, all of which bear witness to
203 the suspension of their power. Soldiers indeed boast of their scars, but it is because
204 their foes were well-matched with them, and their conflicts were necessary, and the
205 marks of what they have suffered is a proof of what they have done; but He,
206 who *oblatus est, quia voluit*, who "was offered, for He willed it," who exposed Himself to
207 the powers of evil, yet could have saved us without that exposure, who was neither
208 weak in that He was overcome, nor strong in that He overcame, proclaims to the whole
209 world what He has gone through, without the tyrant's shame, without the soldier's
210 pride—He (wonderful it is) has raised up on high, He has planted over the earth, the
211 memorial, that that Evil One whom He cast out of heaven in the beginning, has in the
212 hour of darkness inflicted agony upon Him. For in truth, by consequence of the infinitude
213 of His glory, He is more beautiful in His weakness than in His strength; His wounds
214 shine like stars of light; His very Cross becomes an object of worship; the instruments of
215 His passion, the nails and the thorny crown, are replete with miraculous power. And so
216 He bids the commemoration of His Bloody Sacrifice to be made day by day all over the
217 earth, and He Himself is there in Person to quicken and sanctify it; He rears His bitter
218 but saving Cross in every Church and over every Altar; He shows Himself torn and
219 bleeding upon the wood at the corners of each street and in every village market-place;

220 He makes it the symbol of His religion; He seals our foreheads, our lips, and our breast
221 with this triumphant sign; with it He begins and ends our days, and with it He consigns
222 us to the tomb. And when He comes again, that Sign of the Son of Man will be seen in
223 heaven; and when He takes His seat in judgment, the same glorious marks will be seen
224 by all the world in His Hands, Feet, and Side, which were dug into them at the season of
225 His degradation. Thus "hath King Solomon made himself a litter of the wood of Libanus.
226 The pillars thereof he made of silver, the seat of gold, the going up of purple; the midst
227 he covered with charity for the daughters of Jerusalem. Go forth, ye daughters of Sion;
228 and see King Solomon in the diadem, wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of
229 his espousals, and in the day of his heart's joy."

230 I must not conclude this train of thought, without alluding to a sterner subject, on which it
231 seems to throw some light. There is a class of doctrines which to the natural man are an
232 especial offence and difficulty; I mean those connected with the Divine judgments. Why
233 has the Almighty assigned an endless punishment to the impenitent sinner? Why is it
234 that vengeance has its hold on him when he passes out of this life, and there is no
235 remedy? Why, again, is it that even the beloved children of God, those holy souls who
236 leave this life in His grace and in His favour, are not at once admitted to His face; but, if
237 there be an outstanding debt against them, first enter purgatory and liquidate it? Men of
238 the world shrink from a doctrine like this as impossible, and religious men answer that it
239 is a mystery; and a mystery it is,—that is, it is but another of those instances which
240 Nature and Revelation bring before us of the Divine Infinitude; it is but one of the many
241 overpowering manifestations of the Almighty, when He acts, which remind us, which are
242 intended to remind us, that He is infinite, and above and beyond human measure and
243 understanding,—which lead us to bow the head and adore Him, as Moses did, when He
244 passed by, and with him awfully to proclaim His Name, as "the Lord God, who hath
245 dominion, keeping mercy for thousands, and returning the iniquity of the fathers upon
246 the children and children's children to the third and fourth generation".

247 Thus the attributes of God, though intelligible to us on their surface,—for from our own
248 sense of mercy and holiness and patience and consistency, we have general notions of
249 the All-merciful and All-holy and All-patient, and of all that is proper to His Essence,—
250 yet, for the very reason that they are infinite, transcend our comprehension, when they
251 are dwelt upon, when they are followed out, and can only be received by faith. They are
252 dimly shadowed out, in this very respect, by the great agents which He has created in
253 the material world. What is so ordinary and familiar to us as the elements, what so
254 simple and level to us, as their presence and operation? yet how their character
255 changes, and how they overmaster us, and triumph over us, when they come upon us
256 in their fulness! The invisible air, how gentle is it, and intimately ours! we breathe it
257 momentarily, nor could we live without it; it fans our cheek, and flows around us, and we
258 move through it without effort, while it obediently recedes at every step we take, and
259 obsequiously pursues us as we go forward. Yet let it come in its power, and that same
260 silent fluid, which was just now the servant of our necessity or caprice, takes us up on
261 its wings with the invisible power of an Angel, and carries us forth into the regions of
262 space, and flings us down headlong upon the earth. Or go to the spring, and draw
263 thence at your pleasure, for your cup or your pitcher, in supply of your wants; you have

264 a ready servant, a domestic ever at hand, in large quantity or in small, to satisfy your
265 thirst, or to purify you from the dust and mire of the world. But go from home, reach the
266 coast; and you will see that same humble element transformed before your eyes. You
267 were equal to it in its condescension, but who shall gaze without astonishment at its
268 vast expanse in the bosom of the ocean? who shall hear without awe the dashing of its
269 mighty billows along the beach? who shall without terror feel it heaving under him, and
270 swelling and mounting up, and yawning wide, till he, its very sport and mockery, is
271 thrown to and fro, hither and thither, at the mere mercy of a power which was just now
272 his companion and almost his slave? Or, again, approach the flame: it warms you, and
273 it enlightens you; yet approach not too near, presume not, or it will change its nature.
274 That very element which is so beautiful to look at, so brilliant in its character, so graceful
275 in its figure, so soft and lambent in its motion, will be found in its essence to be of a
276 keen, resistless nature; it tortures, it consumes, it reduces to ashes that of which it was
277 just before the illumination and the life. So it is with the attributes of God; our knowledge
278 of them serves us for our daily welfare; they give us light and warmth and food and
279 guidance and succour; but go forth with Moses upon the mount and let the Lord pass
280 by, or with Elias stand in the desert amid the wind, the earthquake, and the fire, and all
281 is mystery and darkness; all is but a whirling of the reason, and a dazzling of the
282 imagination, and an overwhelming of the feelings, reminding us that we are but mortal
283 men and He is God, and that the outlines which Nature draws for us are not His perfect
284 image, nor to be pronounced inconsistent with those further lights and depths with
285 which it is invested by Revelation.

286 Say not, my brethren, that these thoughts are too austere for this season, when we
287 contemplate the self-sacrificing, self-consuming charity wherewith God our Saviour has
288 visited us. It is for that very reason that I dwell on them; the higher He is, and the more
289 mysterious, so much the more glorious and the more subduing is the history of His
290 humiliation. I own it, my brethren, I love to dwell on Him as the Only-begotten Word ; nor
291 is it any forgetfulness of His sacred humanity to contemplate His Eternal Person. It is
292 the very idea, that He is God, which gives a meaning to His sufferings; what is to me a
293 man, and nothing more, in agony, or scourged, or crucified? there are many holy
294 martyrs, and their torments were terrible. But here I see One dropping blood, gashed by
295 the thong, and stretched upon the Cross, and He is God. It is no tale of human woe
296 which I am reading here; it is the record of the passion of the great Creator. The Word
297 and Wisdom of the Father, who dwelt in His bosom in bliss ineffable from all eternity,
298 whose very smile has shed radiance and grace over the whole creation, whose traces I
299 see in the starry heavens and on the green earth, this glorious living God, it is He who
300 looks at me so piteously, so tenderly from the Cross. He seems to say,—I cannot move,
301 though I am omnipotent, for sin has bound Me here. I had had it in mind to come on
302 earth among innocent creatures, more fair and lovely than them all, with a face more
303 radiant than the Seraphim, and a form as royal as that of Archangels, to be their equal
304 yet their God, to fill them with My grace, to receive their worship, to enjoy their
305 company, and to prepare them for the heaven to which I destined them; but, before I
306 carried My purpose into effect, they sinned, and lost their inheritance; and so I come
307 indeed, but come, not in that brightness in which I went forth to create the morning stars
308 and to fill the sons of God with melody, but in deformity and in shame, in sighs and

309 tears, with blood upon My cheek, and with My limbs laid bare and rent. Gaze on Me, O
310 My children, if you will, for I am helpless; gaze on your Maker, whether in contempt, or
311 in faith and love. Here I wait, upon the Cross, the appointed time, the time of grace and
312 mercy; here I wait till the end of the world, silent and motionless, for the conversion of
313 the sinful and the consolation of the just; here I remain in weakness and shame, though
314 I am so great in heaven, till the end, patiently expecting My full catalogue of souls, who,
315 when time is at length over, shall be the reward of My passion and the triumph of My
316 grace to all eternity.

317 Passion-tide