

1 "The Thought of God, the Stay of the Soul"  
2 *Parochial and Plain Sermons* vol. V sermon 22  
3 Saint John Henry Newman  
4 June 9, 1839

5 "Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but ye have received the Spirit  
6 of adoption, whereby we cry Abba, Father." Rom. viii. 15.

7 WHEN Adam fell, his soul lost its true strength; he forfeited the inward light of God's  
8 presence, and became the wayward, fretful, excitable, and miserable being which his  
9 history has shown him to be ever since; with alternate strength and feebleness,  
10 nobleness and meanness, energy in the beginning and failure in the end. Such was the  
11 state of his soul in itself, not to speak of the Divine wrath upon it, which followed, or was  
12 involved in the Divine withdrawal. It lost its spiritual life and health, which was necessary  
13 to complete its nature, and to enable it to fulfil the ends for which it was created,—which  
14 was necessary both for its moral integrity and its happiness; and as if faint, hungry, or  
15 sick, it could no longer stand upright, but sank on the ground. Such is the state in which  
16 every one of us lies as born into the world; and Christ has come to reverse this state,  
17 and restore us the great gift which Adam lost in the beginning. Adam fell from his  
18 Creator's favour to be a bond-servant; and Christ has come to set us free again, to  
19 impart to us the Spirit of adoption, whereby we become God's children, and again  
20 approach Him as our Father.

21 I say, by birth we are in a state of defect and want; we have not all that is necessary for  
22 the perfection of our nature. As the body is not complete in itself, but requires the soul to  
23 give it a meaning, so again the soul till God is present with it and manifested in it, has  
24 faculties and affections without a ruling principle, object, or purpose. Such it is by birth,  
25 and this Scripture signifies to us by many figures; sometimes calling human nature  
26 blind, sometimes hungry, sometimes unclothed, and calling the gift of the Spirit light,  
27 health, food, warmth, and raiment; all by way of teaching us what our first state is, and  
28 what our gratitude should be to Him who has brought us into a new state. For instance,  
29 "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing; and  
30 knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I  
31 counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white  
32 raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, ... and anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou  
33 mayest see." Again, "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath  
34 shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of  
35 Jesus Christ." Again, "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ  
36 shall give thee light." Again, "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him, shall  
37 never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing  
38 up into everlasting life." And in the Book of Psalms, "They shall be satisfied with the  
39 plenteousness of Thy house; and Thou shalt give them drink of Thy pleasures as out of  
40 the river. For with Thee is the well of life, and in Thy Light shall we see light." And in  
41 another Psalm, "My soul shall be satisfied, even as it were with marrow and fatness,  
42 when my mouth praiseth Thee with joyful lips." And so again, in the Prophet Jeremiah,  
43 "I will satiate the souls of the priests with fatness; and My people shall be satisfied with

44 My goodness ... I have satiated the weary soul, and I have replenished every sorrowful  
45 soul." [Rev. iii. 17, 18. 2 Cor. iv. 6. Ephes. v. 14. John iv. 14. Ps. xxxvi. 8, 9; lxiii. 5. Jer.  
46 xxxi. 14, 25.]

47 Now the doctrine which these passages contain is often truly expressed thus: that the  
48 soul of man is made for the contemplation of its Maker; and that nothing short of that  
49 high contemplation is its happiness; that, whatever it may possess besides, it is  
50 unsatisfied till it is vouchsafed God's presence, and lives in the light of it. There are  
51 many aspects in which the same solemn truth may be viewed; there are many ways in  
52 which it may be signified. I will now dwell upon it as I have been stating it.

53 I say, then, that the happiness of the soul consists in the exercise of the affections; not  
54 in sensual pleasures, not in activity, not in excitement, not in self esteem, not in the  
55 consciousness of power, not in knowledge; in none of these things lies our happiness,  
56 but in our affections being elicited, employed, supplied. As hunger and thirst, as taste,  
57 sound, and smell, are the channels through which this bodily frame receives pleasure,  
58 so the affections are the instruments by which the soul has pleasure. When they are  
59 exercised duly, it is happy; when they are undeveloped, restrained, or thwarted, it is not  
60 happy. This is our real and true bliss, not to know, or to affect, or to pursue; but to love,  
61 to hope, to joy, to admire, to revere, to adore. Our real and true bliss lies in the  
62 possession of those objects on which our hearts may rest and be satisfied.

63 Now, if this be so, here is at once a reason for saying that the thought of God, and  
64 nothing short of it, is the happiness of man; for though there is much besides to serve  
65 as subject of knowledge, or motive for action, or means of excitement, yet the affections  
66 require a something more vast and more enduring than anything created. What is novel  
67 and sudden excites, but does not influence; what is pleasurable or useful raises no awe;  
68 self moves no reverence, and mere knowledge kindles no love. He alone is sufficient for  
69 the heart who made it. I do not say, of course, that nothing short of the Almighty Creator  
70 can awaken and answer to our love, reverence, and trust; man can do this for man. Man  
71 doubtless is an object to rouse his brother's love, and repays it in his measure. Nay, it is  
72 a great duty, one of the two chief duties of religion, thus to be minded towards our  
73 neighbour. But I am not speaking here of what we can do, or ought to do, but what it is  
74 our happiness to do: and surely it may be said that though the love of the brethren, the  
75 love of all men, be one half of our obedience, yet exercised by itself, were that possible,  
76 which it is not, it would be no part of our reward. And for this reason, if for no other, that  
77 our hearts require something more permanent and uniform than man can be. We gain  
78 much for a time from fellowship with each other. It is a relief to us, as fresh air to the  
79 fainting, or meat and drink to the hungry, or a flood of tears to the heavy in mind. It is a  
80 soothing comfort to have those whom we may make our confidants; a comfort to have  
81 those to whom we may confess our faults; a comfort to have those to whom we may  
82 look for sympathy. Love of home and family in these and other ways is sufficient to  
83 make this life tolerable to the multitude of men, which otherwise it would not be; but still,  
84 after all, our affections exceed such exercise of them, and demand what is more stable.  
85 Do not all men die? are they not taken from us? are they not as uncertain as the grass  
86 of the field? We do not give our hearts to things irrational, because these have no

87 permanence in them. We do not place our affections in sun, moon, and stars, or this  
88 rich and fair earth, because all things material come to nought, and vanish like day and  
89 night. Man, too, though he has an intelligence within him, yet in his best estate he is  
90 altogether vanity. If our happiness consists in our affections being employed and  
91 recompensed, "man that is born of a woman" cannot be our happiness; for how can he  
92 stay another, who "continueth not in one stay" himself?

93 But there is another reason why God alone is the happiness of our souls, to which I  
94 wish rather to direct attention:—the contemplation of Him, and nothing but it, is able fully  
95 to open and relieve the mind, to unlock, occupy, and fix our affections. We may indeed  
96 love things created with great intenseness, but such affection, when disjoined from the  
97 love of the Creator, is like a stream running in a narrow channel, impetuous, vehement,  
98 turbid. The heart runs out, as it were, only at one door; it is not an expanding of the  
99 whole man. Created natures cannot open us, or elicit the ten thousand mental senses  
100 which belong to us, and through which we really live. None but the presence of our  
101 Maker can enter us; for to none besides can the whole heart in all its thoughts and  
102 feelings be unlocked and subjected. "Behold," He says, "I stand at the door and knock;  
103 if any man hear My voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him,  
104 and he with Me." "My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our  
105 abode with him." "God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts." "God is  
106 greater than our heart, and knoweth all things." [Rev. iii. 20. John xiv. 23. Gal. iv. 6. 1  
107 John iii. 20.] It is this feeling of simple and absolute confidence and communion, which  
108 soothes and satisfies those to whom it is vouchsafed. We know that even our nearest  
109 friends enter into us but partially, and hold intercourse with us only at times; whereas  
110 the consciousness of a perfect and enduring Presence, and it alone, keeps the heart  
111 open. Withdraw the Object on which it rests, and it will relapse again into its state of  
112 confinement and constraint; and in proportion as it is limited, either to certain seasons or  
113 to certain affections, the heart is straitened and distressed. If it be not over bold to say it,  
114 He who is infinite can alone be its measure; He alone can answer to the mysterious  
115 assemblage of feelings and thoughts which it has within it. "There is no creature that is  
116 not manifest in His sight, but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with  
117 whom we have to do." [Heb. iv. 12.]

118 This is what is meant by the peace of a good conscience; it is the habitual  
119 consciousness that our hearts are open to God, with a desire that they should be open.  
120 It is a confidence in God, from a feeling that there is nothing in us which we need be  
121 ashamed or afraid of. You will say that no man on earth is in such a state; for we are all  
122 sinners, and that daily. It is so; certainly we are quite unfitted to endure God's all-  
123 searching Eye, to come into direct contact (if I may so speak) with His glorious  
124 Presence, without any medium of intercourse between Him and us. But, first, there may  
125 be degrees of this confidence in different men, though the perfection of it be in none.  
126 And again, God in His great mercy, as we all well know, has revealed to us that there is  
127 a Mediator between the sinful soul and Himself. And as His merits most wonderfully  
128 intervene between our sins and God's judgment, so the thought of those merits, when  
129 present with the Christian, enables him, in spite of his sins, to lift up his heart to God;  
130 and believing, as he does, that he is (to use Scripture language) in Christ, or, in other

131 words, that he addresses Almighty God, not simply face to face, but in and through  
132 Christ, he can bear to submit and open his heart to God, and to wish it open. For while  
133 he is very conscious both of original and actual sin, yet still a feeling of his own sincerity  
134 and earnestness is possible; and in proportion as he gains as much as this, he will be  
135 able to walk unreservedly with Christ his God and Saviour, and desire His continual  
136 presence with him, though he be a sinner, and will wish to be allowed to make Him the  
137 one Object of his heart. Perhaps, under somewhat of this feeling, Hagar said, "Thou,  
138 God, seest me." It is under this feeling that holy David may be supposed to say,  
139 "Examine me, O Lord, and prove me; try out my reins and my heart." "Try me, O God,  
140 and seek the ground of my heart; prove me, and examine my thoughts. Look well, if  
141 there be any way of wickedness in me; and lead me in the way everlasting." [Ps. xxvi. 2;  
142 cxxxix. 23, 24.] And especially is it instanced in St. Paul, who seems to delight in the  
143 continual laying open of his heart to God, and submitting it to His scrutiny, and waiting  
144 for His Presence upon it; or, in other words, in the joy of a good conscience. For  
145 instance, "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." "Herein do I  
146 exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward  
147 men." "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not; my conscience also bearing me witness in the  
148 Holy Ghost." "Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and  
149 godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our  
150 conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward." [Acts xxiii. 1; xxiv. 16.  
151 Rom. ix. 1. 2 Cor. i. 12.] It is, I say, the characteristic of St. Paul, as manifested to us in  
152 his Epistles, to live in the sight of Him who "searcheth the reins and the heart," to love to  
153 place himself before Him, and, while contemplating God, to dwell on the thought of  
154 God's contemplating him.

155 And, it may be, this is something of the Apostle's meaning, when he speaks of the  
156 witness of the Spirit. Perhaps he is speaking of that satisfaction and rest which the soul  
157 experiences in proportion as it is able to surrender itself wholly to God, and to have no  
158 desire, no aim, but to please Him. When we are awake, we are conscious we are  
159 awake, in a sense in which we cannot fancy we are, when we are asleep. When we  
160 have discovered the solution of some difficult problem in science, we have a conviction  
161 about it which is distinct from that which accompanies fancied discoveries or guesses.  
162 When we realize a truth we have a feeling which they have not, who take words for  
163 things. And so, in like manner, if we are allowed to find that real and most sacred Object  
164 on which our heart may fix itself, a fulness of peace will follow, which nothing but it can  
165 give. In proportion as we have given up the love of the world, and are dead to the  
166 creature, and, on the other hand, are born of the Spirit unto love of our Maker and Lord,  
167 this love carries with it its own evidence whence it comes. Hence the Apostle says, "The  
168 Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." Again, he  
169 speaks of Him "who hath sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts."  
170 [Rom. viii. 16. 2 Cor. i. 22.]

171 I have been saying that our happiness consists in the contemplation of God;—(such a  
172 contemplation is alone capable of accompanying the mind always and everywhere, for  
173 God alone can be always and everywhere present;)—and that what is commonly said  
174 about the happiness of a good conscience, confirms this; for what is it to have a good

175 conscience, when we examine the force of our words, but to be ever reminded of God  
176 by our own hearts, to have our hearts in such a state as to be led thereby to look up to  
177 Him, and to desire His eye to be upon us through the day? It is in the case of holy men  
178 the feeling attendant on the contemplation of Almighty God.

179 But, again, this sense of God's presence is not only the ground of the peace of a good  
180 conscience, but of the peace of repentance also. At first sight it might seem strange how  
181 repentance can have in it anything of comfort and peace. The Gospel, indeed, promises  
182 to turn all sorrow into joy. It makes us take pleasure in desolateness, weakness, and  
183 contempt. "We glory in tribulations also," says the Apostle, "because the love of God is  
184 shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." It destroys anxiety:  
185 "Take no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of  
186 itself." It bids us take comfort under bereavement: "I would not have you ignorant,  
187 brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which  
188 have no hope." [Rom. v. 3, 5. Matt. vi. 34. 1 Thess. iv. 13.] But if there be one sorrow,  
189 which might seem to be unmixed misery, if there be one misery left under the Gospel,  
190 the awakened sense of having abused the Gospel might have been considered that  
191 one. And, again, if there be a time when the presence of the Most High would at first  
192 sight seem to be intolerable, it would be then, when first the consciousness vividly  
193 bursts upon us that we have ungratefully rebelled against Him. Yet so it is that true  
194 repentance cannot be without the thought of God; it has the thought of God, for it seeks  
195 Him; and it seeks Him, because it is quickened with love; and even sorrow must have a  
196 sweetness, if love be in it. For what is to repent but to surrender ourselves to God for  
197 pardon or punishment; as loving His presence for its own sake, and accounting  
198 chastisement from Him better than rest and peace from the world? While the prodigal  
199 son remained among the swine, he had sorrow enough, but no repentance; remorse  
200 only; but repentance led him to rise and go to his Father, and to confess his sins. Thus  
201 he relieved his heart of its misery, which before was like some hard and fretful tumour  
202 weighing upon it. Or, again, consider St. Paul's account of the repentance of the  
203 Corinthians; there is sorrow in abundance, nay, anguish, but no gloom, no dryness of  
204 spirit, no sternness. The penitents afflict themselves, but it is from the fulness of their  
205 hearts, from love, gratitude, devotion, horror of the past, desire to escape from their  
206 present selves into some state holier and more heavenly. St. Paul speaks of their  
207 "earnest desire, their mourning, their fervent mind towards him." He rejoices, "not that  
208 they were made sorry, but that they sorrowed to repentance." "For ye were made sorry,"  
209 he proceeds, "after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing."  
210 And he describes this "sorrowing after a godly sort," to consist in "carefulness, which it  
211 wrought in them," "clearing of themselves,"—"indignation,"—"fear,"—"vehement  
212 desire,"—"zeal,"—"revenge," [2 Cor. vii. 7, 9, 11.]—feelings, all of them, which open the  
213 heart, yet, without relaxing it, in that they terminate in acts or works.

214 On the other hand, remorse, or what the Apostle calls "the sorrow of the world," worketh  
215 death. Instead of coming to the Fount of life, to the God of all consolation, remorseful  
216 men feed on their own thoughts, without any confidant of their sorrow. They disburden  
217 themselves to no one: to God they will not, to the world they cannot confess. The world  
218 will not attend to their confession; it is a good associate, but it cannot be an intimate. It

219 cannot approach us or stand by us in trouble; it is no Paraclete; it leaves all our feelings  
220 buried within us, either tumultuous, or, at best, dead: it leaves us gloomy or obdurate.  
221 Such is our state, while we live to the world, whether we be in sorrow or in joy. We are  
222 pent up within ourselves, and are therefore miserable. Perhaps we may not be able to  
223 analyse our misery, or even to realize it, as persons oftentimes who are in bodily  
224 sicknesses. We do not know, perhaps, what or where our pain is; we are so used to it  
225 that we do not call it pain. Still so it is; we need a relief to our hearts, that they may be  
226 dark and sullen no longer, or that they may not go on feeding upon themselves; we  
227 need to escape from ourselves to something beyond; and much as we may wish it  
228 otherwise, and may try to make idols to ourselves, nothing short of God's presence is  
229 our true refuge; everything else is either a mockery, or but an expedient useful for its  
230 season or in its measure.

231 How miserable then is he, who does not practically know this great truth! Year after year  
232 he will be a more unhappy man, or, at least, he will emerge into a maturity of misery at  
233 once, when he passes out of this world of shadows into that kingdom where all is real.  
234 He is at present attempting to satisfy his soul with that which is not bread; or he thinks  
235 the soul can thrive without nourishment. He fancies he can live without an object. He  
236 fancies that he is sufficient for himself; or he supposes that knowledge is sufficient for  
237 his happiness; or that exertion, or that the good opinion of others, or (what is called)  
238 fame, or that the comforts and luxuries of wealth, are sufficient for him. What a truly  
239 wretched state is that coldness and dryness of soul, in which so many live and die, high  
240 and low, learned and unlearned. Many a great man, many a peasant, many a busy  
241 man, lives and dies with closed heart, with affections undeveloped, unexercised. You  
242 see the poor man, passing day after day, Sunday after Sunday, year after year, without  
243 a thought in his mind, to appearance almost like a stone. You see the educated man,  
244 full of thought, full of intelligence, full of action, but still with a stone heart, as cold and  
245 dead as regards his affections, as if he were the poor ignorant countryman. You see  
246 others, with warm affections, perhaps, for their families, with benevolent feelings  
247 towards their fellow-men, yet stopping there; centring their hearts on what is sure to fail  
248 them, as being perishable. Life passes, riches fly away, popularity is fickle, the senses  
249 decay, the world changes, friends die. One alone is constant; One alone is true to us;  
250 One alone can be true; One alone can be all things to us; One alone can supply our  
251 needs; One alone can train us up to our full perfection; One alone can give a meaning  
252 to our complex and intricate nature; One alone can give us tune and harmony; One  
253 alone can form and possess us. Are we allowed to put ourselves under His guidance?  
254 this surely is the only question. Has He really made us His children, and taken  
255 possession of us by His Holy Spirit? Are we still in His kingdom of grace, in spite of our  
256 sins? The question is not whether we should go, but whether He will receive. And we  
257 trust, that, in spite of our sins, He will receive us still, every one of us, if we seek His  
258 face in love unfeigned, and holy fear. Let us then do our part, as He has done His, and  
259 much more. Let us say with the Psalmist, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there  
260 is none upon earth I desire in comparison of Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; but  
261 God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever." [Ps. lxxiii. 25, 26.]

262 Quinquagesima.