

"Religious Cowardice"
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St. John Henry Newman
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"Lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees." Hebrews xii. 12.

[Note] THE chief points of St. Mark's history are these:—first, that he was sister's-son to Barnabas, and taken with him and St. Paul on their first apostolical journey; next, that after a short time he deserted them and returned to Jerusalem; then, that after an interval, he was St. Peter's assistant at Rome, and composed his Gospel there principally from the accounts which he received from that Apostle; lastly, that he was sent by him to Alexandria, in Egypt, where he founded one of the strictest and most powerful churches of the primitive times.

The points of *contrast* in his history are as follows:—that first he abandoned the cause of the Gospel as soon as danger appeared; afterwards, he proved himself, not merely an ordinary Christian, but a most resolute and exact servant of God, founding and ruling that strictest Church of Alexandria.

And the *instrument* of this change was, as it appears the influence of St. Peter, a fit restorer of a timid and backsliding disciple.

The *encouragement* which we derive from these circumstances in St. Mark's history, is, that the feeblest among us may through God's grace become strong. And the *warning* to be drawn from it is, to distrust ourselves; and again, not to despise weak brethren, or to despair of them, but to bear their burdens and help them forward, if so be we may restore them. Now, let us attentively consider the subject thus brought before us.

Some men are naturally impetuous and active; others love quiet and readily yield. The over-earnest must be sobered, and the indolent must be roused. The history of Moses supplies us with an instance of a proud and rash spirit, tamed down to an extreme gentleness of deportment. In the greatness of the change wrought in him, when from a fierce, though honest, avenger of his brethren, he became the meekest of men on the earth, he evidences the power of faith, the influence of the Spirit on the heart. St. Mark's history affords a specimen of the other, and still rarer change, from timidity to boldness. Difficult as it is to subdue the more violent passions, yet I believe it to be still more difficult to overcome a tendency to sloth, cowardice, and despondency. These evil dispositions cling about a man, and weigh him down. They are minute chains, binding him on every side to the earth, so that he cannot even turn himself or make an effort to rise. It would seem as if right principles had yet to be planted in the indolent mind; whereas violent and obstinate tempers had already something of the nature of firmness and zeal in them, or rather what will become so with care, exercise, and God's blessing. Besides, the events of life have a powerful influence in sobering the ardent or self-confident temper. Disappointments, pain, anxiety, advancing years, bring with them

36 some natural wisdom as a matter of course; and, though such tardy improvement
37 bespeaks but a weak faith, yet we may believe that the Holy Ghost often blesses these
38 means, however slowly and imperceptibly. On the other hand, these same
39 circumstances do but increase the defects of the timid and irresolute, who are made
40 more indolent, selfish, and faint-hearted by advancing years, and find a sort of sanction
41 of their unworthy caution in their experience of the vicissitudes of life.

42 St. Mark's change, therefore, may be considered even more astonishing in its nature
43 than that of the Jewish Lawgiver. "By faith," he was "out of weakness made strong," and
44 becomes a memorial of the more glorious and marvellous gifts of the last and spiritual
45 Dispensation.

46 Observe in what St. Mark's weakness lay. There is a sudden defection, which arises
47 from self-confidence. Such was St. Peter's. He had trusted too much to his mere good
48 feelings; he was honest and sincere, and he thought that he could do what he wished to
49 do. How far apart from each other are to wish and to do! yet we are apt to confuse
50 them. Sometimes indeed earnest desire of an object will by a sudden impulse surmount
51 difficulties, and succeed without previous practice. Enthusiasm certainly does wonders
52 in this way; just as men of weakly frames will sometimes from extreme excitement inflict
53 blows of incredible power. And sometimes eagerness sets us on beginning to exert
54 ourselves; and, the first obstacles being thus removed, we go on as a matter of course
55 with comparatively small labour. All this, being from time to time witnessed, impresses
56 us with a conviction, unknown to ourselves, that a sanguine temper is the main
57 condition of success in any work. And when, in our lonely imaginings, we fancy
58 ourselves taking a strenuous part in some great undertaking, or when we really see
59 others playing the man, so very easy does heroism seem to be, that we cannot admit
60 the possibility of our failing, should circumstances call us to any difficult duty. St. Peter
61 thought that he could preserve his integrity, because he wished to do so; and he fell,
62 from ignorance of the difficulty of doing what he wished.

63 In St. Mark's history, however, we have no evidence of self-confidence; rather, we may
64 discern in it the state of multitudes at the present day, who proceed through life with a
65 certain sense of religion on their minds, who have been brought up well and know the
66 Truth, who acquit themselves respectably while danger is at a distance, but disgrace
67 their profession when brought into any unexpected trial. His mother was a woman of
68 influence among the Christians at Jerusalem; his mother's brother, Barnabas, was an
69 eminent Apostle. Doubtless he had received a religious education; and, as being the
70 friend of Apostles and in the bosom of the pure Church of Christ, he had the best
71 models of sanctity before his eyes, the clearest teaching, the fullest influences of grace.
72 He was shielded from temptation. The time came when his real proficiency in faith and
73 obedience was to be tried. Paul and Barnabas were sent forth to preach to the Heathen;
74 and they took Mark with them as an attendant. First they sailed to Cyprus, the native
75 place of Barnabas: they travelled about it, and then crossed over to the main land. This
76 seems to have been their first entrance upon an unknown country. Mark was
77 discouraged at the prospect of danger, and returned to Jerusalem.

78 Now, who does not see that such a character as this, such a trial, and such a fall,
79 belong to other days, besides those of the Apostles? Or rather, to put the question to us
80 more closely, who will deny that there are multitudes in the Church at present, who have
81 no evidence to themselves of more than that passive faith and virtue, which in Mark's
82 case proved so unequal even to a slight trial? Who has not some misgivings of heart,
83 lest, in times such as these, when Christian firmness is so little tried, his own loyalty to
84 his Saviour's cause be perchance no truer or firmer than that of the sister's-son of a
85 great Apostle? When the Church is at peace, as it has long been in this country, when
86 public order is preserved in the community, and the rights of person and property
87 secured, there is extreme danger lest we judge ourselves by what is without us, not by
88 what is within. We take for granted we are Christians, because we have been taught
89 aright, and are regular in our attendance upon the Christian ordinances. But, great
90 privilege and duty as it is to use the means of grace, reading and prayer are not
91 enough; nor, by themselves will they ever make us real Christians. They will give us
92 right knowledge and good feelings, but not firm faith and resolute obedience. Christians,
93 such as Mark, will abound in a prosperous Church; and, should trouble come, they will
94 be unprepared for it. They have so long been accustomed to external peace that they
95 do not like to be persuaded that danger is at hand. They settle it in their imagination that
96 they are to live and die undisturbed. They look at the world's events, as they express
97 it, *cheerfully*, and argue themselves into self-deception. Next, they make concessions,
98 to fulfil their own predictions and wishes; and surrender the Christian cause, that
99 unbelievers may not commit themselves to an open attack upon it. Some of them are
100 men of cultivated and refined taste; and these shrink from the rough life of pilgrims, to
101 which they are called, as something strange and extravagant. They consider those who
102 take a simpler view of the duties and prospects of the Church to be enthusiastic, rash,
103 and intemperate, or perverse-minded. To speak plainly, a state of persecution is not
104 (what is familiarly called) their *element*; they cannot breathe in it. Alas! how different
105 from the Apostle, who had learned in whatsoever state he was, therewith to be content,
106 and who was all things to all men. If then there be times when we have grown thus
107 torpid from long security, and are tempted to prefer the treasures of Egypt to the
108 reproach of Christ, what can we do, what ought we to do, but to pray God in some way
109 or other to try the very heart of the Church, and to afflict us here rather than hereafter?
110 Dreadful as is the prospect of Satan's temporary triumph, fierce as are the horsehoofs
111 of his riders, and detestable as is the cause for which they battle, yet better such
112 anguish should come upon us, than that the recesses of our heritage should be the
113 hiding-places of a self-indulgent spirit and the schools of lukewarmness. May God arise
114 and shake terribly the earth (though it be an awful prayer), *rather* than the double-
115 minded should lie hid among us, and souls be lost by present ease! Let Him arise, if
116 there be no alternative, and chasten us with His sweet discipline, as our hearts may
117 best bear it; bringing our sins out in this world, that we be not condemned in the day of
118 the Lord; shaming us here, reproving us by the mouth of His servants, then restoring us,
119 and leading us on by a better way to a truer and holier hope! Let Him winnow us, till the
120 chaff be clean removed! though, in thus invoking Him, we know not what we ask, and,
121 feeling the end itself to be good, yet cannot worthily estimate the fearfulness of that
122 chastisement which we so freely speak about. Doubtless we do not, cannot measure
123 the terrors of the Lord's judgments; we use words cheaply. Still, it cannot be wrong to

124 use them, seeing they are the best offering we can make to God; and, so that we beg
125 Him the while to lead us on, and give us strength to bear the trial according as it opens
126 upon us. So may we issue Evangelists for timid deserters of the cause of truth;
127 speaking the words of Christ, and showing forth His Life and death; rising strong from
128 our sufferings, and building up the Church in the strictness and zeal of those who
129 despise this life except as it leads to another.

130 Lastly, let us not, from an excited fancy and a vain longing after the glories of other
131 days, forget the advantages which we have. No need to have the troubles of Apostles in
132 order to attain their faith. Even in the quietest times we may rise to high holiness, if we
133 improve the means given us. Trials come when we forget mercies,—to remind us of
134 them, and to fit us to enjoy and use them suitably

Note

135 The Feast of St. Mark the Evangelist.