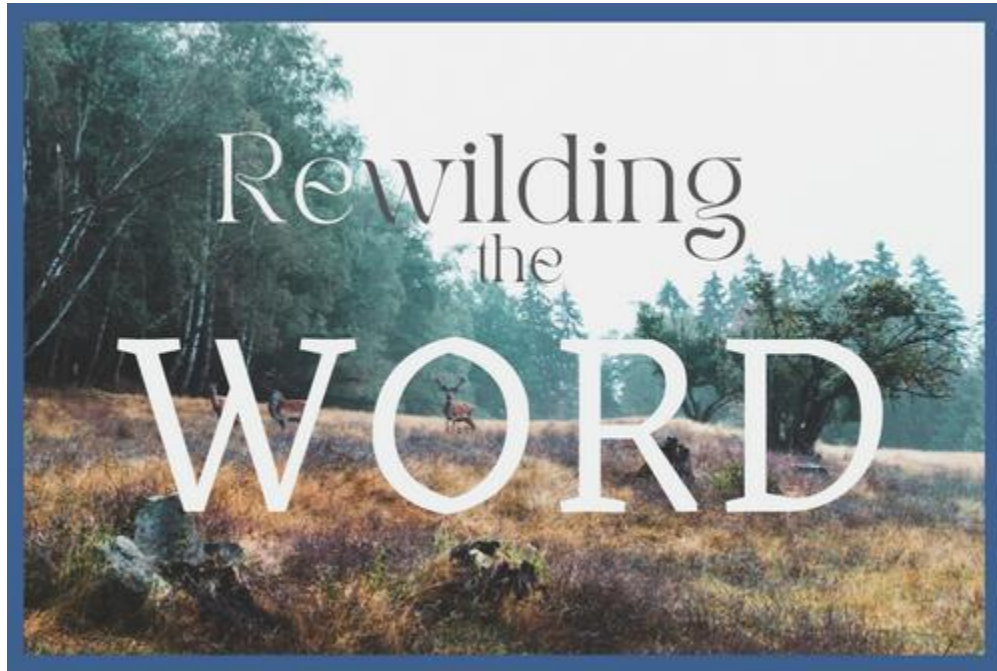

GANZ - #15 - REWILDING THE WORD (OCTOBER 2025)



A Story

We pray in the Lord's Prayer that God not "put us to the test". See Luke 11:

² He said to them, 'When you pray, this is what to say:^a

Father, may your name be held holy,
your kingdom come;*

³ give us each day our daily bread,^b
and forgive us our sins,^c

⁴ for we ourselves forgive each one who is in debt to us.

And do not put us to the test.' ¹

* IMt 6:9-13

¹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 11:2-4. This comment: "Some take lead us not into temptation in the sense of NEB, 'do not bring us to the test'. But this is to be preferred only if we take the whole prayer as eschatological. The word *peirasmōs* is the normal word for 'temptation' (though it can mean 'test') and temptation is surely correct here. This does not imply that God does sometimes cause us to be tempted, and in fact James assures us that he never does (Jas 1:13). Rather Jesus is encouraging an attitude, the attitude that flees from temptation (cf. 1

And what we mean is that we know how we could be thrust into a circumstance that we know is beyond our capacity “to handle.” We, usually by others, are rendered helpless, “handed over into the power of men” as Jesus put it and who then experienced it. At such moments, the evil spirit (what St. Ignatius of Loyola, and with penetrating insight, called “the enemy of our human nature”) can tempt us let go our trust in God. “Do not put us to such a test, ever!” we beg. How many times in my priestly life have I walked with people through such a calamity crashing, unlooked for, into their lives.

In my life, I had such a moment. Dante himself expressed such a moment in his own life in this way (*Inferno*, Canto I), capturing feelings like my own:

The keening sound
I still make shows how hard it is to say
How harsh and bitter that place felt to me —
Merely to think of it renews the fear —
So bad that death by only a degree
Could possibly be worse.

And to my dismay, what came to me in that experience was a boyhood prayer that I had been taught, had been told to memorize – I must have been no more than four years old when I learned that prayer. It was *that* prayer that I prayed over and over and over during that time, even though I knew other prayers, good prayers, ones composed by the greatest Saints, and in the case of the Lord’s Prayer, by Jesus Himself! I leaned on a prayer that I had *memorized* when I was a boy, very possibly the first prayer that I had ever memorized, before I had learned by heart the “Hail, Mary” and the “Our Father” and the “Glory Be”. That prayer was:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake,
I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take.

The prayer that we closely read below, written by St. John Henry Newman, he composed during some weeks in his life when he found himself lost, in circumstances beyond his ability to “fix”. It is a prayer that a person might choose to memorize, saying/praying it often. It might be for you that *necessary* prayer, the one that you need,

Cor. 6:18; 10:14; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22).” [Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 213.]

when the lights have gone out of your world.

A Text - From *In Love with Love: 100 of the Greatest Mystical Poems*, eds. Anne and Christopher Fremantle (1978), 124.

A Note about the author:²

For Newman, the way to God was always through books. His autobiography, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* [published April 1864] – the “apology³ for his life” – is as much about what Newman read as what he did. He writes in intricate detail of the thinkers and ideas that fascinated and shaped him.

Newman was ordained an Anglican priest in 1825 and became a curate in Oxford, where he was also a fellow at Oriel College Oxford. His specialty was Patristics – the study of the Fathers of the early Church – and what he read slowly led him towards the Roman Catholic Church.

For Newman, becoming Catholic was not a quick or easy decision. He knew that if he became a Catholic, it would cost him friends as well as his livelihood, since he would not be able to function as a member of the Anglican clergy nor retain his Oxford fellowship. But for Newman, simply setting aside difficult questions was never an option. Newman wrote, “The one question was, what was I to do? I had to make up my mind for myself, and others could not help me. I determined to be guided, not by my imagination, but by my reason.” Newman wrote in a diary in 1829, “I am now in my rooms in Oriel College, slowly advancing and led on by God's hand blindly, not knowing whither He is taking me.”

St. John Henry Newman (1801-1890)⁴
“The Pillar of Cloud” (or, “Lead, Kindly Light”)
Written at Sea, on June 16, 1833

² This useful account from the Catholic Cathedral of St. James of the Archdiocese of Seattle. For the full text: <https://www.stjames-cathedral.org/PoemoftheWeek/newman-leadkindlylight.aspx>. They have there a commendable tradition of presenting A Poem a Month.

³ “**apology**” – In current American English, we most always mean by this word something we say to someone whom we have hurt or harmed – “to offer an apology”, etc. But what the noun means, and has meant for far longer, is to give a reasoned account (literally, *apo-* “from”; *-logia*, “reason”), to explain why something is the way it is.

⁴ *Catholic News Agency* on 28 September 2025 – “Pope Leo XIV announced on Sunday that he will proclaim St. John Henry Newman a doctor of the Church on Nov. 1, the solemnity of All Saints. ‘I will

Lead, Kindly Light,⁵ amid th'encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

I was not ever thus, nor prayed that Thou
Shouldst lead me on;
I loved to choose and see my path; but now
Lead Thou me on!
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will. Remember not past years!

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on.
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till
The night is gone,
And with the morn those angel faces smile,
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile!

A Close Reading

We keep a close eye on **Exodus 13:17-22**, in whose lines Newman finds the biblical framing best suited to what he has been feeling when he wrote this poem:

Exodus 13 (NJB): ²¹ Yahweh preceded them, by day in a pillar of cloud to show them the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they

confer the title of **Doctor of the Church** on St. John Henry Newman, who gave a decisive contribution to the renewal of theology and to understanding Christian doctrine in its development, in the context of the Jubilee of the World of Education,' the pope said after celebrating Mass for the Jubilee of Catechists in St. Peter's Square. With the proclamation, Newman will become the 38th doctor of the Church, joining a select group of saints recognized for their enduring contribution to Catholic theology and spirituality. He is especially noted for his insights on the development of doctrine and the role of conscience."

⁵ For a haunting, sublime version of this poem set to music, find it by John Rutter and performed by The Cambridge Singers (12 November 2021), "Lead, Kindly Light" - <https://music.apple.com/us/album/lead-kindly-light/1592745799?i=1592745800>.

could march by day and by night.* ²² The pillar of cloud never left its place ahead of the people during the day, nor the pillar of fire during the night. ⁶

“Lead, Kindly Light” - The poem begins with this command, which Newman in his unbearable helplessness speaks to God. This seems impertinent⁷ - “Who are we to command God?” Yet, we think of the famous line from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine: “Give what you command, O Lord, and then command whatever you will.” It is right that we feel bold about “commanding” God to give to us what He has already demonstrated that He wants to give us. Such as other commands, “Forgive me!” or “Remember us!” or “Love us, or me!” We notice that Newman does not demand an *explanation* from God about the human complexities in which he finds himself trapped. How difficult it is for us to break the bad habit of complaining to God, saying “Why?”, which is always the wrong question. It is enough for him to ask God to lead him ... wherever God wishes to take him. In the spirit of John 10, Newman recalls that in the biblical world, shepherds did not “drive” their flocks (e.g., the Australian and American tradition of “drovers”, those who drive herds from behind) but “called them” by name, “going before them”, that they hearing his voice could follow him. Thus, Newman commands “Lead!”, because his sheep may command him, their shepherd, to do what he already intends.

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd;
I know my own
and my own know me, ⁸

The adjective **“kindly”** has unlooked for textures of meaning. We find in the 15th century it qualifies something “that is naturally suited to or required by a person ... something proper or fitting or appropriate for a person to have.” In this sense, Newman has understood that the divine Light (the Holy Spirit) is *required* that we might become persons at all; **we are made/designed to receive the Light**. This is what the great Jesuit

* 40:36+ Dt 1:33; Ne 9:19; Ps 78:14; 105:39; Ws 10:17-18; 18:3; Is 4:5; Jn 8:12; 10:4

⁶ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ex 13:21-22.

⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at **“impertinent”** - **4.a.** - Characterized by presumptuous speech or behaviour, or by intrusion or interference in that which is not one's concern; insolent; rude, disrespectful.

⁸ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 10:14.

philosopher, Bernard Lonergan, SJ⁹ meant by “obediential potency”¹⁰ – a person defined as a creature made by God with an active capacity to listen closely to God and to respond. Newman is acknowledging that the divine Light is not like the lights at a Football stadium – very bright; diffused over a large area; indiscriminate. Rather, it is a highly personal gift of Light, perfectly fitted to each person, giving to each person a capacity to know and to love God and to be able to love others as God does. St. Paul is getting at this when he famously writes:

Romans 5 (NJB): ³ Not only that; let us exult, too, in our hardships, understanding that hardship develops perseverance,* ⁴ and perseverance develops a tested character, something that gives us hope,* ⁵ and a hope which will not let us down, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.¹¹

The noun “**Light**” is a famous way of referring to God, as if it were one of His personal names. What is striking about this Name is how it is the very expression of a Person Who is completely other-centered – the very heart of what it means to be LOVE. How? *Because light does not see itself*; it is that by which we are capable of seeing other things. This means that for us to love God will always mean, at least in great part, to love what the divine Light allows us to see, to *notice* what God reveals to us to see and to respond to it as something shown us by God.

“**Keep Thou my feet**” – Have you noticed that when it is very dark, and we need to move, on foot, through that darkness to some destination, we keep our head up and eyes bulging out, and our head moving to enable the different light-gathering capacities of our inner eye (the “rods and cones”) to pick up whatever light is available? But in

⁹ **Lonergan, Bernard (1904–84)** Canadian Jesuit priest, philosopher, and theologian, born Buckingham, Quebec, and ordained to the priesthood in 1936. He obtained the doctorate at Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. [Richard Bernier, “Lonergan, Bernard,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. Andrew Louth (Oxford, United Kingdom; New York: Oxford University Press, 2022) 1157.]

¹⁰ ChatGPT concerning “**obediential potency**” in Lonergan: “Basic idea: a built-in, ordered capacity or finality in human nature that is properly obedient to and directed toward a supernatural end; human powers are naturally disposed to receive and cooperate with supernatural grace (an intrinsic “vertical” orientation).” I think, but I am not sure, that this is what St. Thomas Aquinas, OP refers to as “**sanctifying grace**.” I will have to ask my longtime friend Professor Michael Stebbins about this.

* 3:23h

* 2 Co 12:9–10; Jm 1:2–4; 1 P 4:13–14; Rv 1:9 • 1 Co 13:13e • 8:4–16; Ga 4:4–6; 3:26m

¹¹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ro 5:3–5.

order to do this, we cannot also be watching where our feet step. Thus, Newman asks God to guard him from tripping and falling, as he, Newman, keeps his head up and eyes straining to find any light, or some lighter texture of dark. The **“Thou”** used to be in English a more familiar way of addressing another person (now considered an archaic way of speaking). In that earlier stage of English, to use **“Thou”** when addressing a person revealed how the speaker felt himself or herself personally closer to the hearer. Notice the familiarity indicated by **“thy”** (i.e., your) in the Lord’s Prayer - **“thy Kingdom come; thy will be done”**.

“I loved to choose and see my path” – A wise Jesuit, who had spent most of his life spiritually directing people, remarked to me. “Rick, I now believe that it is only when a person has completely exhausted every spiritual technique, has expended himself or herself making every effort to get **“right”** his or her spiritual path, only then does there emerge the real possibility that he or she might surrender to God.” Newman, a man of such prodigious talents, took a long time to get there (as did C.S. Lewis) because, as he remarks: “I loved the garish¹² day, and, spite of fears, / Pride ruled my will.” Fr. Moreland, SJ then said, “Only when this surrender begins to happen does a person’s genuine spiritual path truly begin.” You hear Newman voicing his surrender throughout this poem, expressing his surrender to God in a single word, **“Lead”**, and then **“one step enough for me.”**¹³

“O’er moor and fen, o’er crag and torrent” – When Dante began the first volume – *Inferno* – of his three great, interlinked master works – the *Divine Comedy* – he spoke of himself as lost in a dark wood, which he describes as filled with dangerous, wild creatures. For Dante, an urban dweller, the **“primeval forest”** was a place of frightening strangeness, a place to avoid, populated with wild animals with a taste for human flesh.

Clive James,¹⁴ translator, *Inferno*, opening lines –

¹² The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adjective **“garish”** – **1. – 1545** – Of dress, ornament, ceremonial, etc.: Obtrusively or vulgarly bright in colour, showy, gaudy.

¹³ How often it has been the case in my experience of spiritually directing people that a person comes seeking from me a new *technique*, which if he or she were to practice it, they imagine that it would make their spiritual life better, giving them the means to **“feel good”** about their spiritual progress. People often seek a **“sure thing”** rather committing themselves to learn, patiently and humbly, the unique ways that God is already present within them, richly alive in them. It takes training (not techniques) for a person to learn how to pay attention, to learn how to **“read”** his or her inner experiences (one’s thoughts and affects, one’s longings), discovering how the Spirit communicates **“with sighs too deep for words.”**

¹⁴ **Clive James (1939-2019):** Born in Australia, Clive James lives in Cambridge, England. He is the author of *Unreliable Memoirs*; a volume of selected poems, *Opal Sunset*; and the best-selling *Cultural Amnesia*. He has written for the *New York Times Book Review*, *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*. He is an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) and a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE).

At the mid-point of the path through life, I found
Myself lost in a wood so dark, the way
Ahead was blotted out. The keening sound
I still make shows how hard it is to say
How harsh and bitter that place felt to me –
Merely to think of it renews the fear –
So bad that death by only a degree
Could possibly be worse. As you shall hear,
It led to good things too, eventually,
But there and then I saw no sign of those,
And can't say even now how I had come
To be there, stunned....

Newman here deploys images from the wild, untamed lands as his way of capturing how his *lostness* had really frightened him, causing him to feel, regularly, that even with all of his gifts, he knew that he was completely out of his league, beyond his ability to “fix” his spiritual life and path. And it is one thing to be lost in the wild lands in the daytime; it is quite another experience to be lost at night out there, as Newman describes himself to have been!

An Action

Memorize this poem. Having in one's memory such an articulate and lovely spiritual expression of surrender to God can be solace as well as spiritual direction given us when I or you find ourselves lost. Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, wrote that this poem, put to music, was sung by women as they were marched to the Ravensbrück death camp, a concentration camp exclusively for women open from 1939 to 1945 in northern Germany. It was also sung by miners trapped underground in a mining disaster in 1909 in Durham, England. [These references from *One Hundred Great Catholic Poems* (2023)¹⁵].

And/or spend time praying the words as you listen to those who have “covered” this poem with music (and there are so many!). For example:

John Rutter and the Cambridge Singers, *Lead, Kindly Light* (2021)

The Mormon Tabernacle Choir, “Lead, Kindly Light”, *Then Sings My Soul* (2006)

Audrey Assad, “Lead, Kindly Light”, *Fortunate Fall* (2013)

Sharon Hopkins, “Lead, Kindly Light”, *Lead Kindly Light* (2007)

¹⁵ This book was a gift to me from Tracy Thorne, L.Ac., MAOM, MTS, a distinguished practitioner of Oriental Medicine in Portland, OR.

Coventry Cathedral's Saint Michael Singers, "Lead, Kindly Light", *The Hymn Makers Best Loved Hymns*, volume 2 (2012)

Notre Dame University Folk Choir, directed by Steven C. Warner, "Lead, Kindly Light", *We Will Rest in Thee* (2012)