

The Ember Days

by J.H. Newman

The Ember Days are a time of prayer and fasting for the Ministers of the Gospel, that they may be blessed with God's grace and heavenly benediction.

Scripture: Romans 15:30

Topics: "Prayer For Ministers", "Church Leadership"

Description

J.H. Newman emphasizes the importance of praying for ministers of the Gospel, following the example set by St. Paul in his epistles. He highlights the duty of continuous prayer for the spread of the Gospel, the protection of ministers from opposition, and the empowerment of their ministry through the prayers of the Church. Newman stresses the significance of specific times of prayer, such as during ordinations, as a means of seeking God's grace and guidance for those entering the ministry. He encourages the revival of the practice of observing Ember days for focused intercession for clergy members, acknowledging the power of united prayer in bringing blessings and protection to the Church.

Transcript

IN reading the Epistles of St. Paul we cannot but observe how earnestly he presses upon those to whom he was writing, the duty of praying for a blessing on himself and his ministry. We not only find his request contained in general terms (1 Thess. v. 25.), "Brethren, pray for us;" but when he feels he stands in need of any particular support, he mentions it as an especial subject of prayer for the Churches. For instance, in writing to the Romans, at a time when he was looking forward to trouble from Jewish unbelievers, he says to them, (c. xv. 30.) "Strive together with me in your prayers to GOD for me, that I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea;" and in Phil. i. 19. he expresses a confidence that the very opposition he was meeting with would, through the intercession of the Saints, be turned into a good to himself. "I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayer." It is the same when he has any object at heart, which he desires to see accomplished. He longs much for the spread of the Gospel, and therefore, in 2 Thess. iii. 1. he says, "Finally, Brethren, pray for us, that the word of GOD may have free course and be glorified." And feeling his own weakness to discharge the sacred trust committed to him, he asks the Ephesians (c. vi. 15. 19.) to make supplication in his behalf, "that utterance might be given unto him, that he might open his mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the Gospel." I shall mention but one passage more, that in 2 Cor. i. 11.; for here not only the duty of praying for their Apostle is pressed upon the people, but they are bidden to do so for the express purpose that they might also join in expressing thanks that their prayer had been graciously heard. "Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that, for the

gift bestowed on us by the means of many persons, thanks may be given by many on our behalf" (Compare Col. ii. 4. Heb. xiii. 19. Philem. 22.)

These texts show clearly, that it is the Christian's duty to pray at all times for the Ministers of the Gospel. There are other texts which teach that supplication ought particularly to be made for them at the time of their Ordination. We find, that, when our LORD was about to send forth His twelve Apostles to preach His kingdom, "He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to GOD." (Luke vi. 12.) And when one of those Apostles had by transgression fallen from his Ministry, the whole Church united in supplication to GOD, that He would shew whom He had chosen to succeed him. (Acts i. 24, 25.) The same is observable in the Ordination of the first Deacons, where it is said, (Acts vi. 6.) the multitude set them before the Apostles, and "when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them." Again, when Paul and Barnabas are sent forth on their special mission, "the Church fasted and prayed" for them. (Acts xiii. 3.) And St. Paul in turn observed the same practice, when he ordained Elders in the Churches where he had preached. "They prayed with fasting, and commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed." Acts xiv. 23.

In conformity to this Apostolical custom, the Church of England views with peculiar solemnity the times at which her Ministers are ordained; and invites all her members to join, at these sacred seasons, in prayer and fasting in their behalf. It is the object of these pages to bring this subject especially before the reader's notice; for the observance of this ordinance of the Church has fallen so generally into disuse, that few comparatively feel the value of it; and some perhaps are not even aware of its existence. To those who may be in this case, I would say briefly that the Ordination Sundays occur four times a year, and that the days of fasting, or Ember Days, (as they are called,) are in the week immediately before those respective Sundays. These days are as follows; the Wednesday, Friday and Saturday after the first Sunday in Lent; after the Feast of Pentecost; after Sept. 14; after Dec. 13; as may be seen by referring to the Prayer-Book. And particular prayers are ordered during the whole of the weeks, in which these days occur; that the Bishops may make a wise and faithful choice, and that those who are to be called to the Ministry, may especially be blessed with GOD'S grace and heavenly benediction.

That such a practice is good and right in itself, and could not fail to produce a large benefit, cannot be doubted by those, who believe that prayer is the appointed channel whereby GOD is pleased to send mercies on mankind. He that feels the truth of "Ask, and it shall be given you," cannot deny, that he is losing a great privilege, whenever he neglects this duty. And if there is any Order of men who more especially need the help of others' supplications, it is that of those, who are called to the high office of ministering the Word of Life to their fellow-creatures, and of being labourers together with their Divine Master in bringing men to salvation. I would go further than this, and say, that if there is any time when the Ministers of the Gospel more particularly call for the prayers of the Church, it is at these seasons of Ordination. Whether we consider the solemn office which the Bishops are performing, or the solemn vows which the Priests and Deacons are taking on themselves, we must allow that it is an occasion of the greatest importance. Here are a number of men going forth for the great work of winning back to CHRIST souls which have gone astray from the right path, and of fighting in the first ranks against the world, the flesh, and the devil; and in most cases going forth young and inexperienced in their work, not knowing (for who can know till he has tried?) the dangers and difficulties which beset them. Surely it is the duty of every Christian to give them what help he can, and send them forth strengthened for the labours of their journey.

I doubt not that there are many in this kingdom, who are in the habit of making supplication to GOD for their Ministers; many who join heartily in the several prayers of the Church services, where mention is

made of them, as well as remember them in their private devotions. And some of these may ask, of what advantage it is to appoint particular days for such intercession. They may say, "we pray daily for the Clergy, and not unfrequently for those who are just entering their Ministerial life, Why should one day be fixed upon as better than another for this purpose? Let each do as he finds opportunity." I would answer, first, that as it was the custom of the Apostles to set apart the times of Ordination for especial prayer, as well as the regulation of our own Church, it is no longer a matter of indifference to us whether we adopt this method or not. The example of the one, and the injunction of the other, mark plainly for us what we ought to do. But, secondly, there will be advantages to ourselves in taking the course so recommended; I would mention one or two which appear to be of importance.

1. When men have been at all careless and indifferent about any duty, (and how few are there who can say that they have not been careless in this matter?) it is very useful to have some settled way for beginning it aright. What has long been put off from time to time is seldom properly attended to, if we leave the performance of it to any chance opportunity that may be offered. The convenient season will seldom come, or at least will not come to us in so profitable a way. For setting apart a particular occasion for solemn prayer, brings with it more seriousness and attention, and makes us think far more of the value of the blessing for which we ask.

2. And, secondly, I would remind all those who value the promises of the Bible, that there is an especial blessing promised to united prayer. Our LORD says, (Matt. viii. 19.) "If two of you shall agree on earth, as touching any thing they shall ask, it shall be done for them of MY FATHER which is in Heaven." And when a good is sought for all, all ought to be seeking for it, and "striving together," that it may be obtained. Now this could not be done, except days were appointed, which all may know of as a standing Ordinance; and to be able to join together in spirit, however far apart they are in body. We might thus not only in all parts of this kingdom, but in distant lands, wherever our brethren are residing, unite in sending up supplications, which our common FATHER would not fail to hear and answer abundantly. And when engaged in prayer we should have the great comfort and support of knowing that we are not single, but that others are perhaps mentioning what we are leaving out; and that others have more earnestness and devotion than we feel in ourselves.

Should this paper fall into the hands of any who have never before heard or thought seriously of this Institution, it may be useful to offer a few hints for its better observance. Let each consecrate the days as much as possible to prayer and holy meditation, adding to them religious Fasting, if health permit. The true end of fasting is beautifully expressed in the Collect for the first Sunday in Lent; "using such abstinence, that our Flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey our LORD'S godly motions in righteousness and true holiness." It is to give the mind liberty and ability to consider and reflect while it is actually engaged in Divine service, or preparing for some solemn part of it; to humble ourselves before GOD under a sense of our sins, and the misery to which they expose us; to deprecate his anger, and to supplicate His mercy and favour. [1] We must use it in the same spirit in which Daniel did, when he set himself to pray for pardon for his own and his brethren's sins, and sought "the LORD GOD with prayer and supplication, and fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes." Dan. ix. 3.

The subjects for Prayer on the Ember days will be the Church of GOD of which we are members; especially those who are called to bear office in the same; and of these, more particularly those who are either ordaining or being ordained. But our Petitions need not stop with these. These are seasons, in which every Minister should be remembered before the throne of grace, in which every Bishop, Priest, and Deacon, claims the prayers of the People. We may ask for them, that their doctrine may be sound and

pure, and may come to the hearts of their hearers; that they may diligently labour in their several spheres of action, for the glory of GOD and the good of mankind; above all, that they may themselves lead holy lives, such as are consistent with their high profession. And, because we are so much more earnest in prayer when we are asking for particular things, and those which we feel to need ourselves, we may make especial mention of our own Clergyman, and our own Bishop, praying that the light, which shines on them, may be reflected on our own neighbourhood. For the same reason, if we happen to know of any trouble or trial, to which the Sacred Ministry near us is exposed, we may mention this also. Additional subjects of meditation will arise according to the particular Ember days which we are celebrating. In those in Lent we shall have more particularly before us our LORD'S example of prayer and fasting, and ask for His Ministers, that they may be like Him, in retiring from the world, and overcoming worldly snares and temptations. In those in Whitsun-week, we shall remember our SAVIOUR'S words, that His disciples would fast when He was taken from them, think much of the HOLY SPIRIT, which is vouchsafed to them to supply His absence, and implore GOD that on us in our day this precious Blessing may be given abundantly. And again in those in Advent, we shall reflect on the near approach of the anniversary of our LORD'S birth, reflect on His forerunner, the self-denying Baptist, who was filled with the Holy Ghost from His mother's womb, and pray that the "ministers and stewards of His mysteries may like him prepare the way for CHRIST'S second coming.

The times in which we live will furnish additional ground for supplication. We cannot but see, that there is a great struggle going on between good and evil; and that, while we trust true Religion is increasing, it cannot be denied that Infidelity and Opposition to lawful authority, whether of GOD or man, is increasing likewise. And, especially, as regards our own Church, we cannot shut our eyes to the fact, that she has many and powerful enemies, both visible and invisible, and that wicked spirits and wicked men are seeking to undermine and overthrow her. The thought of these evils on all sides will naturally lead us to Him, who alone can protect us from them.

These remarks are written, in the hope that those who read will ask themselves honestly, whether they have not been guilty of neglecting the proper observance of the Ember days; and whether the revival of the primitive custom of keeping them might not be attended with a great national blessing; whether it might not be a means under God of averting the dangers which surround us. Many are now lamenting that we have in some respects lost sight of that "godly discipline," which the Church orders for the good of her members. But ought we not to seek a restoration of what is lost, as well as lament for it; and seriously set ourselves to the most effectual way of gaining what we need? And again, many are crying out against the faults of the Church; but have any a right to do so, till they themselves have tried every means in their power of amending what they feel to be an evil? And can we say, that we have tried every means, as long as an Institution like that of which I have been speaking, so edifying, and so likely to gain a blessing, is so generally neglected?

FOOTNOTE

[1] Nelson's Festivals and Fasts, p. 358.

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