# After the Earthquake

John Chrysostom (c. AD 349–407)

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**John Chrysostom, Homily after the Earthquake.[1]**
[Translated by Bryson Sewell]

[M. 713] Even if feebleness hindered us[2] from celebrating with you[3] the spiritual chorus, nevertheless the labor of your journey did not make you faint. For even if that effort led you, dripping with much sweat, to this place,[4] nevertheless the lesson of the sermon changed our feebleness into health, and, through the singing of psalms, it eased your labor. For this reason, I, though unwell, did not bind my tongue in silence, nor did you, though weary, remove yourselves from hearing. However, as soon as the sermon appeared, your labor receded; as soon as the teaching appeared, your weariness fled. For, while illness and labor belong to the body, instruction is the perfection and healing of the soul. And to the degree that the soul is better than the body, by so much are its[5] achievements more valuable. And so for this reason, not only with illness hindering me, but also in the face of countless other obstacles, I did not withdraw from being entwined in your love, I was not deprived, not today, of this good celebration. But while we[6] were, until just now, fixed to our bed, God did not permit that we should be destroyed completely by the famine. For just as it is a famine for you not to hear, so for me it is a famine not to speak. In this way, too, a mother, though she is often sick, would prefer that her breast be stretched by her child, rather than to see him wasting away because of a famine.

May my body also be strained! For who would not gladly shed even his own blood for you, men so ardent in piety, so ardent in observance, who have shown such repentance in a small space of time.[7] You do not know day and night, but you make both times into day, not by dismissing the gloom, but by enlightening the nights with vigils; your nights are sleepless, and the tyranny of sleep has been destroyed. For yearning for Christ has overcome the inferiority of nature. You were released from being human in your bodies by mimicking powers, exhibiting sleeplessness, earnest fasting, great labor because of your journey, labor with respect to nature, [but] relaxation with respect to choice. This is the fruit of fears, this is the advancement of the earthquake, an advancement that is never spent up, an advancement

that makes even the poor rich, and enriches the wealthy. It does not know poverty, it does not know wealth. The earthquake came, and it did away with the unevenness of life. Where, now, are those who wear silken robes? Where is the gold? All of those things have gone away, and they were torn asunder more easily than a spider's web, and they disappeared[8] more [quickly] than spring-time flowers. But since I see that your mind is prepared, I wish to set before you a more plentiful table. I see your bodies worn down, but your soul renewed. The fountains of sweat are many, but they wipe the conscience clean.

For if athletes drip with blood for the sake of leaves of laurel, which is given today and tomorrow withers away, how much more ought you, who enter into the trial of virtuous actions, not to surrender in the labors for virtue, nor to grow soft. You as my audience are my crown, [M. 714] and one of you as a hearer is equivalent to the city. For some, on the one hand, crowned mixing-bowls, while others convened satanic symposiums, and still others prepared a sumptuous table. But you completed so great a vigil, and you cleansed all the city by the stepping of your holy feet, having measured out the market-place with your walking, and having made the air holy. For the air becomes holy from the singing of psalms, just as today you heard God saying to Moses, "The place where you are standing is holy ground."[9] You sanctified the ground, the market-place, you made our city a church.[10] And just as a flowing torrent, carried by a great stream, overturns all things - in this way also the spiritual torrent, the river of God, which gladdens the city of God, was filled with water, and cleansed away the mire of impiety. No one is licentious, or rather, if someone is licentious, he is changed. He hears the voice, and his mind is reformed, the melody comes in, and his impiety is changed, he flees the passions of greediness.

For even if he does not flee, but just as beasts in winter lurk in dens, so his impious mind is buried in the earth, and just as serpents, when frost stiffens their bodies, enter the lower regions, so too these passions, servile and slavish, are thus covered up as if into some abyss. And of course those who carry them[11] are ashamed. For on the one hand they carry them, yet [the passions are] dead. For in place of winter, your melody comes to them. The voice comes into the hearing of greedy men, and even if he does not cast the passion out, yet the passion dies. [The voice] comes into the hearing of the licentious and the arrogant man, and even if he does not put to death his licentiousness and arrogance, he buries his licentiousness and arrogance. It is not a small [matter] not to speak wickedness boldly. I also said yesterday that the fruit from the earthquakes is great. Do you see the love for humanity of the Master[12] who shakes [the] city and who makes [the] mind firm? He who rocks [the] foundations, and strengthens [our] thoughts? He who makes the city cracked, and makes our judgment strong? Set your minds on His love for humanity. He shook for a little while, He strengthened continuously. The earthquake [lasted] for two days, but let piety remain into all time. You were distressed for a little while,

but you were rooted continuously. For I well know that, by the fear of God, your piety took root;

and if an abatement should occur, the fruit remains. No longer are the thorn plants choking, nor an over-whelming rain washing away: the fear cultivated you well, it became an ally to my words. I am silent and the foundations send forth a sound; I remain silent and the earthquake sends forth a voice more sonorous than a trumpet, saying this: ”The Lord is compassionate and merciful, patient and rich in mercy.”[13] I was present, not in order to overwhelm you, but in order to strengthen you. The earthquake says these things, and sends forth a voice: ”I scared you, not in order to grieve [you], but to make you more exact. Pay exact attention to the sermon. Since the sermon was too ineffectual, help called out; since the instruction grew weary, [M. 715] fear fought as an ally. I come speaking those things to you only for a short time, and I do my part. Whenever I bind you tight, then I give you to the sermon, lest the sermon should come to no effect; finding stones and thorn bushes springing up, I make the land clean, so that the sermon may scatter its seeds with a liberal hand.”

How were you harmed by being grieved for a short time? You became angels instead of humans. You were moved toward heaven, even if not in place, at least in character. And as to the fact that I do not say these things in flattery, the facts give testimony. For in which respect did you fall short with regard to the sermon of repentance? You cast out envy, you got rid of your slavish passions. You planted virtue, you endured the whole night through with your holy vigils, great love, and eager disposition. No one remembers interest, no one speaks about greediness,[14] nor are the hands alone pure from sins, but the tongue, too, is freed from lawlessness and abuse. No one assaults his neighbor, no one goes off to satanic symposiums. The houses are pure, the marketplace has been cleansed. Evening arrives, and nowhere are there choruses of young men singing the songs of the theater. Yet there are choruses, though not of licentiousness; choruses, but of virtues. And it is possible to hear the singing of psalms in the marketplace, and [to hear] those sitting at home, one singing psalms, another hymning. Night arrives, and all [run] to the church, the waveless harbor, the calm that has been freed of waves. I was thinking that, after the first or second day, sleeplessness had overcome your bodies. But as it is, your yearning increases to the degree that your sleeplessness is strained. Those who were singing psalms to you grew weary, and you are renewed.

Those singing psalms to you grew exhausted, and you were strengthened. Tell me: where now are the wealthy? Let them learn the philosophy of the poor. For they[15] sleep, but the poor do not sleep on the ground, but bend their knees, mimicking Paul and Silas. But [M. 716] they sung psalms and shook the prison; you sung psalms, and made the city that was shaken firm. The outcomes[16] are

contrary to the circumstances, yet both are for the glory of God. For he shook the prison, in order to shake the mind of the unfaithful, in order to loosen the jailor, in order to proclaim the Word of God. You yourselves made the city firm, in order to undo God's wrath. Both those affairs and these were administered differently. But nevertheless I rejoice, not because the city was made firm, but because it was through your prayers that it was made firm, because your singing of psalms became [the] foundations. The wrath is from above, your voice from below. The voice, sent up from below, restrained the wrath, flowing from above. The heavens were opened, and a judgment[17] was brought down, the whetted sword. The city [is] on the earth, the wrath is inevitable. We have need of nothing but repentance, tears and lamentations, and all things were dissolved. God appeared, and we dissolved his wrath. One would not err should he call you the caretakers and saviors of the city. Where are the rulers? Where are the great saviors?

Of the city you are the truly the towers, the wall, and its security. For they,[18] on the one hand, through their own wickedness allowed the city to rot, but you, through your own virtue, made the city firm. And if someone should be asked why the city was shaken, even if he wouldn't say [it], it has been agreed[19] that it was because of sins, because of acts of greed, because of injustices, because of acts of lawlessness, because of acts of arrogance, because of pleasures, because of deceit. Whose? The rich. Again, if someone should be asked why the city was made firm, it is agreed that it is because of the singing of psalms, because of the prayers, because of the vigils. Whose are these? The poor's. The reasons that shook the city belong to them,[20] while the reasons that made the city firm are yours - and so you became the saviors and the caretakers. But let us end the sermon here, remaining in our vigils, our singing of psalms, sending glory up to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and always, and into eternity.[21] Amen.

[1] CPG 4366, De terrae motu. BHG 1700y. This translation was commissioned by Roger Pearse and translated from the text printed in the Patrologia Graeca, vol. 50, cols. 713-716. The translation has been placed in the public domain. The work perhaps refers to the earthquake of 398 AD. The question of its authenticity is discussed by Wendy Mayer, The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom - Provenance: Reshaping the foundations, 2005, p.27, 126, and answered in the affirmative. Update: Sever J. Voicu on the other hand, has long argued that this homily is not authentic Chrysostom and has challenged Mayer's claims in "Un errore di Montfaucon e altre note pseudochrisostomiche," in Manuscripta Graeca et Orientalia: Mélanges monastiques et patristiques en l' honneur de Paul Géhin, edited by André Binggeli, Anne Boudhors and Matthieu Cassin (Leuven - Paris - Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2016), 597-614; on pp. 602-604. [2] Us = Chrysostom, a pl. used for a sg.

[3] You = the congregation. [4] Possibly meaning to the church. [5] i.e. the soul's achievements. [6] Probably a plural for a singular, i.e., "while I was...fixed to my

bed....” [7] Literally, ”from a small turning of time,” ἀπὸ μικρᾶς καιροῦ τροπῆς. [8] Literally, ”they were tested,” from ἠλέγχθη. The problem is that, in this context, ”they were tested more than spring-time flowers” makes little sense. The point might be that gold, which has been tested (i.e. with fire), offers no lasting security, but, like flowers in spring time, it too passes away. [9] Exodus 3:5; Acts 7:33. [10] Or, ”you made the city a church for us.” [11] i.e. the passions. [12] i.e. God. [13] Psalm 103:8; Septuagint, Psalm 102:8. [14] Or, ”No one speaks greedily.” [15] i.e. the wealthy. [16]Τὰ τέλη. [17]ἀπόφρασις. [18] i.e. the rich and the rulers. [19] Possibly, ”confessed.” [20] i.e. the rich. [21] Literally, ”into the ages of ages.”

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**Source.** English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator’s own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.

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