

Hebrews 11:17-19

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of faith and fortitude in the face of trials and temptations, and encourages listeners to despise earthly things and seek the reward of faith.

Scripture: Hebrews 11:17

Topics: "Faith And Obedience", "Spiritual Trials"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the great faith of Abraham, who obeyed God's command to sacrifice his only son Isaac, believing in God's power to raise him from the dead. Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of faith that goes beyond human reasoning and the need to trust in God's promises even when they seem contradictory. He highlights how trials and temptations are meant to strengthen believers and demonstrate their faith to others. Chrysostom also discusses the dangers of covetousness, the importance of almsgiving, and the need to prioritize heavenly treasures over earthly possessions.

Transcript

By faith [Abraham], when he was tried, offered up Isaac; and he that had received the promises offered up his only-begotten son, of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall your seed be called: accounting that God was able to raise him up even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.

1. Great indeed was the faith of Abraham. For while in the case of Abel, and of Noah, and of Enoch, there was an opposition of reasonings only, and it was necessary to go beyond human reasonings; in this case it was necessary not only to go beyond human reasonings, but to manifest also something more. For what was of God seemed to be opposed to what was of God; and faith opposed faith, and command promise.

I mean this: He had said, Get you out of your country, and from your kindred, and I will give you this land. Genesis 12:1-7 He gave him none inheritance in it, no not so much as to set his foot on. Acts 7:5 Do you see how what was done was opposed to the promise? Again He said, In Isaac shall your seed be called Genesis 21:12, and he believed: and again He says, Sacrifice to Me this one, who was to fill all the world from his seed. You see the opposition between the commands and the promise? He enjoined things that were in contradiction to the promises, and yet not even so did the righteous man stagger, nor say he had been deceived.

For you indeed, he means, could not say this, that He promised ease and gave tribulation. For in our case, the things which He promised, these also He performs. How so? In the world (He says), you shall have

tribulation. John 16:33 He that takes not his cross and follows Me, is not worthy of Me. Matthew 10:38 He that hates not his life shall not find it. John 12:25 And, He that forsakes not all that he has, and follows after Me, is not worthy of Me. Luke 14:27-33 And again, You shall be brought before rulers and kings for My sake. Matthew 10:18 And again, A man's foes shall be they of his own household. Matthew 10:36 But the things which pertain to rest are yonder.

But with regard to Abraham, it was different. He was enjoined to do what was opposed to the promises; and yet not even so was he troubled, nor did he stagger, nor think he had been deceived. But you endure nothing except what was promised, yet you are troubled.

2. He heard the opposite of the promises from Him who had made them; and yet he was not disturbed, but did them as if they had been in harmony [therewith]. For they were in harmony; being opposed indeed according to human calculations, but in harmony [when viewed] by Faith. And how this was, the Apostle himself has taught us, by saying, accounting that God was able to raise Him up, even from the dead. By the same faith (he means) by which he believed that God gave what was not, and raised up the dead, by the same was he persuaded that He would also raise him up after he had been slain in sacrifice. For it was alike impossible (to human calculation, I mean) from a womb which was dead and grown old and already become useless for child-bearing to give a child, and to raise again one who had been slain. But his previous faith prepared the way for things to come.

And see; the good things came first, and the hard things afterwards, in his old age. But for you, on the contrary, (he says) the sad things are first, and the good things last. This for those who dare to say, 'He has promised us the good things after death; perhaps He has deceived us.' He shows that God is able to raise up even from the dead, and if God be able to raise from the dead, without all doubt He will pay all [that He has promised].

But if Abraham so many years before, believed that God is able to raise from the dead, much more ought we to believe it. You see (what I at first said) that death had not yet entered in and yet He drew them at once to the hope of the resurrection, and led them to such full assurance, that when bidden, they even slay their own sons, and readily offer up those from whom they expected to people the world.

And he shows another thing too, by saying, that God tempted Abraham. Genesis 22:1 What then? Did not God know that the man was noble and approved? Why then did He tempt him? Not that He might Himself learn, but that He might show to others, and make his fortitude manifest to all. And here also he shows the cause of trials, that they may not suppose they suffer these things as being forsaken [of God]. For in their case indeed, it was necessary that they should be tried, because there were many who persecuted or plotted against them: but in Abraham's case, what need was there to devise trials for him which did not exist? Now this trial, it is evident, was by His command. The others indeed happened by His allowance, but this even by His command. If then temptations make men approved in such wise that, even where there is no occasion, God exercises His own athletes; much more ought we to bear all things nobly.

And here he said emphatically, By faith, when he was tried, he offered up Isaac, for there was no other cause for his bringing the offering but that.

3. After this he pursues the same thought. No one (he says) could allege, that he had another son, and expected the promise to be fulfilled from him, and therefore confidently offered up this one. And (his words are) he offered up his only-begotten, who had received the promises. Why do you say only-begotten? What then? Of whom was Ishmael sprung? I mean only-begotten (he would say) so far as relates to the

word of the promise. Therefore after saying, Only-begotten, showing that he says it for this reason, he added, of whom it was said, In Isaac shall your seed be called, that is, from him. Do you see how he admires what was done by the Patriarch? In Isaac shall your seed be called, and that son he brought to be sacrificed.

Afterwards, that no one may suppose he does this in despair, and in consequence of this command had cast away that Faith, but may understand that this also was truly of faith, he says that he retained that faith also, although it seem to be at variance with this. But it was not at variance. For he did not measure the power of God by human reasonings, but committed all to faith. And hence he was not afraid to say, that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead.

From whence also he received him in a figure, that is in idea, by the ram, he means. How? The ram having been slain, he was saved: so that by means of the ram he received him again, having slain it in his stead. But these things were types: for here it is the Son of God who is slain.

And observe, I beseech you, how great is His lovingkindness. For inasmuch as a great favor was to be given to men, He, wishing to do this, not by favor, but as a debtor, arranges that a man should first give up his own son on account of God's command, in order that He Himself might seem to be doing nothing great in giving up His own Son, since a man had done this before Him; that He might be supposed to do it not of grace, but of debt. For we wish to do this kindness also to those whom we love, others, to appear first to have received some little thing from them, and so give them all: and we boast more of the receiving than of the giving; and we do not say, We gave him this, but, We received this from him.

From whence also (are his words) he received him in a figure, i.e. as in a riddle (for the ram was as it were a figure of Isaac) or, as in a type. For since the sacrifice had been completed, and Isaac slain in purpose, therefore He gave him to the Patriarch.

4. You see, that what I am constantly saying, is shown in this case also? When we have proved that our mind is made perfect, and have shown that we disregard earthly things, then earthly things also are given to us; but not before; lest being bound to them already, receiving them we should be bound still. Loose yourself from your slavery first (He says), and then receive, that you may receive no longer as a slave, but as a master. Despise riches, and you shall be rich. Despise glory, and you shall be glorious. Despise the avenging yourself on your enemies, and then shall you attain it. Despise repose, and then you shall receive it that in receiving you may receive not as a prisoner, nor as a slave, but as a freeman.

For as in the case of little children, when the child eagerly desires childish playthings, we hide them from him with much care, as a ball, for instance, and such like things, that he may not be hindered from necessary things; but when he thinks little of them, and no longer longs for them, we give them fearlessly, knowing that henceforth no harm can come to him from them, the desire no longer having strength enough to draw him away from things necessary; so God also, when He sees that we no longer eagerly desire the things of this world, thenceforward permits us to use them. For we possess them as freemen and men, not as children.

For [in proof] that if you despise the avenging yourself on your enemies, you will then attain it, hear what he says, If your enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink, and he added, for in so doing, you shall heap coals of fire on his head. Romans 12:20 And again, that if you despise riches, you shall then obtain them, hear Christ saying, There is no man which has left father, or mother, or house, or brethren, who shall not receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. Matthew 19:29 And that if you

despise glory, you shall then attain it, again hear Christ Himself saying, He that will be first among you, let him be your minister. Matthew 20:26 And again, For whosoever shall humble himself, he shall be exalted. Matthew 23:12

What do you say? If I give drink to mine enemy, do I then punish him? If I give up my goods, do I then possess them? If I humble myself, shall I then be exalted? Yea, He says, for such is My power, to give contraries by means of contraries. I abound in resources and in contrivances: be not afraid. The 'Nature of things' follows My will: not I attend upon Nature. I do all things: I am not controlled by them: wherefore also I am able to change their form and order.

5. And why do you wonder if [it is so] in these instances? For you will find the same also in all others. If you injure, you are injured; if you are injured, then you are uninjured; if you punish, then you have not punished another, but hast punished yourself. For he that loves iniquity, it is said, hates his own soul. Psalm 11:5, Septuagint Do you see that thou dost not injure, but art injured? Seest thou that thou hast not been injured, but injurest? "Perhaps this may be the true reading, St Chrys. in these words turning his address to those who are suffering worldly wrong: and saying that if they patiently endure, they are not the sufferers, but inflict suffering on their oppressors, though the expression ■ δίκαις is very strong.---> Therefore also Paul says, Why do ye not rather take wrong? 1 Corinthians 6:7 Do you see that this is not to be wronged?

When you insult, then are you insulted. And most persons partly know this: as when they say one to another, Let us go away, do not disgrace yourself. Why? Because the difference is great between you and him: for however much you insult him, he accounts it a credit. Let us consider this in all cases, and be above insults. I will tell you how.

Should we have a contest with him who wears the purple, let us consider that in insulting him, we insult ourselves, for we become worthy to be disgraced. Tell me, what do you mean? When you are a citizen of Heaven, and hast the Philosophy that is above, do you disgrace yourself with him that minds earthly things? Philippians 3:19 For though he be in possession of countless riches, though he be in power, he does not as yet know the good that is therein. Do not in insulting him, insult yourself. Spare yourself, not him. Honor yourself, not him. Is there not some Proverb such as this, He that honors; honors himself? With good reason: for he honors not the other, but himself. Hear what a certain wise man says, Do honor to your soul according to the dignity thereof. Sirach 10:28 According to the dignity thereof, what is this? If he have defrauded (it means), do not thou defraud; if he has insulted, do not thou insult.

6. Tell me, I pray you, if some poor man has taken away clay thrown out of your yard, would you for this have summoned a court of justice? Surely not. Why? Lest you should disgrace yourself; lest all men should condemn you. The same also happens in this case. For the rich man is poor, and the more rich he is, the poorer is he in that which is indeed poverty. Gold is clay, cast out in the yard, not lying in your house, for your house is Heaven. For this, then, will you summon a Court of Justice, and will not the citizens on high condemn you? Will they not cast you out from their country, who art so mean, who art so shabby, as to choose to fight for a little clay? For if the world were yours, and then some one had taken it, ought thou to pay any attention to it?

Do you not know, that if you were to take the world ten times or an hundred times, or ten thousand times, and twice that, it is not to be compared with the least of the good things in Heaven? He then who admires the things here slights those yonder, since he judges these worthy of exertion, though so far inferior to the

other. Nay, rather indeed he will not be able to admire those other. For how [can he], while he is passionately excited towards these earthly things? Let us cut through the cords and entanglements: for this is what earthly things are.

How long shall we be stooping down? How long shall we plot one against another, like wild beasts; like fishes? Nay rather, the wild beasts do not plot against each other, but [against] animals of a different tribe. A bear for instance does not readily kill a bear, nor a serpent kill a serpent, having respect for the sameness of race. But you, with one of the same race, and having innumerable claims, as common origin, rational faculties, the knowledge of God, ten thousand other things, the force of nature, him who is your kinsman, and partaker of the same nature -- him you kill, and involvest in evils innumerable. For what, if you dost not thrust your sword, nor plunge your right hand into his neck, other things more grievous than this you do, when you involve him in innumerable evils. For if you had done the other, you would have freed him from anxiety, but now you encompass him with hunger, with slavery, with feelings of discouragement, with many sins. These things I say, and shall not cease to say, not [as] preparing you to commit murder: nor as urging you to some crime short of that; but that you may not be confident, as if you were not to give account. For (it says) he that takes away a livelihood Sirach 34:22 and asks bread, it says.

7. Let us at length keep our hands to ourselves, or rather, let us not keep them, but stretch them out honorably, not for grasping, but for almsgiving. Let us not have our hand unfruitful nor withered; for the hand which does not alms is withered; and that which is also grasping, is polluted and unclean.

Let no one eat with such hands; for this is an insult to those invited. For, tell me, if a man when he had made us lie down on tapestry and a soft couch and linen interwoven with gold, in a great and splendid house, and had set by us a great multitude of attendants, and had prepared a tray of silver and gold, and filled it with many dainties of great cost and of all sorts, then urged us to eat, provided we would only endure his besmearing his hands with mire or with human ordure, and so sitting down to meat with us -- would any man endure this infliction? Would he not rather have considered it an insult? Indeed I think he would, and would have gone straightway off. But now in fact, you see not hands filled with what is indeed filth, but even the very food, and yet thou dost not go off, nor flee, nor find fault. Nay, if he be a person in authority, thou even accountest it a grand affair, and destroyest your own soul, in eating such things. For covetousness is worse than any mire; for it pollutes, not the body but the soul, and makes it hard to be washed. Thou therefore, though you see him that sits at meat defiled with this filth both on his hands and his face, and his house filled with it, nay and his table also full of it (for dung, or if there be anything more unclean than that, it is not so unclean and polluted as those viands), do you feel as if forsooth thou were highly honored, and as if you were going to enjoy yourself?

And do you not fear Paul who allows us to go without restraint to the Tables of the heathen if we wish, but not even if we wish to those of the covetous? For, if any man who is called a Brother 1 Corinthians 5:11, he says, meaning here by Brother every one who is a believer simply, not him who leads a solitary life. For what is it which makes brotherhood? The Washing of regeneration; the being enabled to call God our Father. So that he that is a Monk, if he be a Catechumen, is not a Brother, but the believer though he be in the world, is a Brother. If any man, says he, that is called a Brother. 1 Corinthians 5:11 For at that time there was not even a trace of any one leading a Monastic life, but this blessed [Apostle] addressed all his discourse to persons in the world. If any man, he says, that is called a Brother, be a fornicator, or covetous or a drunkard, with such an one, no not to eat. But not so with respect to the heathen: but If any of them that believe not, meaning the heathen, bid you and you be disposed to go, whatsoever is set before you

eat. 1 Corinthians 10:27

8. If any man that is called Brother be (he says) a drunkard. Oh! What strictness! Yet we not only do not avoid drunkards, but even go to their houses, partaking of what they set before us.

Therefore all things are upside down, all things are in confusion, and overthrown, and ruined. For tell me, if any such person should invite you to a banquet, you who art accounted poor and mean, and then should hear you say, Inasmuch as the things set before me are [the fruit] of overreaching, I will not endure to defile my own soul, would he not be mortified? Would he not be confounded? Would he not be ashamed? This alone were sufficient to correct him, and to make him call himself wretched for his wealth, and admire you for your poverty, if he saw himself with so great earnestness despised by you.

But we are become (I know not why) servants of men 1 Corinthians 7:23, though Paul cries aloud throughout, Be not ye the servants of men. Whence then have we become servants of men? Because we first became servants of the belly, and of money, and of glory, and of all the rest; we gave up the liberty which Christ bestowed on us.

What then awaits him who has become a servant (tell me)? Hear Christ saying, The servant abides not in the house forever. John 8:35 You have a declaration complete in itself, that he never enters into the Kingdom; for this is what the House means. For, He says, in My Father's House are many mansions. John 14:2 The servant then abides not in the House forever. By a servant He means him who is the servant of sin. But he that abides not in the House for ever, abides in Hell for ever, having no consolation from any quarter.

Nay, to this point of wickedness are matters come, that they even give alms out of these [ill-gotten gains], and many receive [them]. Therefore our boldness has broken down, and we are not able to rebuke any one. But however, henceforward at least, let us flee the mischief arising from this; and you who have rolled yourselves in this mire, cease from such defilement, and restrain your rage for such banquets, if even now we may by any means be able to have God propitious to us, and to attain to the good things which have been promised: which may we all obtain in Christ Jesus our Lord, with whom to the Father together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, power, honor, now and for ever, and world without end. Amen.

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