

Homily 20 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's homily explores the transformative power of God's call through the story of Ananias and Saul's conversion.

Scripture: Matthew 10:38, Acts 9:10-25, 2 Corinthians 11:32

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

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the conversion of Saul, highlighting how Ananias, a humble disciple, was chosen by the Lord to play a crucial role in Saul's transformation. Despite Ananias' initial fear and hesitation, he obediently follows God's instructions, demonstrating faith and courage. Through Ananias, God shows that He chooses ordinary vessels to carry out His extraordinary plans, emphasizing the importance of humility and obedience in serving God. Saul, later known as Paul, boldly preaches Jesus in the synagogues, proving that he is the Son of God, despite facing threats and attempts on his life from the Jews.

Transcript

Acts IX. 10, 12

And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord. And the Lord said to him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prays, and has seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.

What may be the reason that He neither drew any one of high authority and importance, nor caused such to be forthcoming for the purpose of instructing Paul? It was, because it was not meet that he should be induced by men, but only by Christ Himself: as in fact this man taught him nothing, but merely baptized him; for, as soon as baptized (φωτισθε■ς), he was to draw upon himself the grace of the Spirit, by his zeal and exceeding earnestness. And that Ananias was no very distinguished person, is plain.

For, the Lord, it says, spoke unto him in a vision, and Ananias answered and said, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he has done to Your saints at Jerusalem. Acts 9:13 For if he spoke in objection to Him, much more would he have done so, had He sent an Angel. And this is why, in the former instance, neither is Philip told what the matter is; but he sees the Angel, and then the Spirit bids him go

near to the chariot. But observe here how the Lord relieves him of his fear: He is blind, says He, and prays, and are you afraid?

In the same way Moses also is afraid: so that the words betokened that he was afraid, and shrunk from the task, not that he did not believe. He said, have heard from many concerning this man. What do you say? God speaks, and you hesitate. They did not yet well know the power of Christ. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on Your name. Acts 9:14 How was that known? It is likely that they, being in fear, made minute enquiries. He does not say this, as thinking that Christ does not know the fact, but, such being the case, how, says he, can these things be?

As in fact those (in the Gospel) say, Who can be saved? -- Mark 10:26 This is done, in order that Paul may believe him that shall come to him: he has seen in a vision: it has showed him beforehand: he prays, says (the Lord): fear not. And observe, He speaks not to him of the success achieved: teaching us not to speak of our achievements. And, though He saw him afraid, for all this He said it not. You shall not be disbelieved: he has seen, says He, in a vision a man (named) Ananias: for this is why it was in a vision, namely, because he was blind.

And not even the exceeding wonderfulness of the thing took possession of the disciple's mind, so greatly was he afraid. But observe: Paul being blind, in this way He restored to sight. But the Lord said to him, Go your way: for he is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will show him how great things he must suffer for My name's sake. (v. 15, 16.) Not only, says He, shall he be a believer, but even a teacher, and great boldness shall he show: 'before Gentiles and kings'-- such shall be the spread of the doctrine! -- that just as He astonished (him) by the former, so He may (startle him even more) by the latter.

And Ananias went, and entered into the house, and laid his hands upon him, and said, Brother Saul -- he straightway addresses him as a friend by that name -- Jesus, Who appeared unto you in the way in which you came-- and yet Christ had not told him this, but he learned it from the Spirit -- has sent me unto you, that you may receive your sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. Acts 9:17 As he said this, he laid his hands upon him. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales.

Acts 9:18 Some say this was a sign of his blindness. Why did he not blind his eyes (entirely)? This was more wonderful, that, with his eyes open, he did not see: Acts 9:8 which was just his case in respect of the Law, until the Name of Jesus was put on him. And he received sight immediately, and arose, and was baptized. And having taken food, he recovered strength. Acts 9:19 He was faint, therefore, both from his journey and from his fear; both from hunger, and from dejection of mind.

Wishing therefore to deepen his dejection, He made the man blind until the coming of Ananias: and, that he might not imagine the blindness to be (only) fancy, this is the reason of the scales. He needed no other teaching: that which had befallen was made teaching (to him). And he was with the disciples which were at Damascus certain days. And straightway in the synagogues he preached Jesus, that He is the Son of God. Acts 9:20 See, straightway he was a teacher in the synagogues.

He was not ashamed of the change, was not afraid while the very things in which he was glorious afore-time, the same he destroyed. Even from his first appearance on the stage here was a man, death-dealing, ready for deeds of blood: do you see what a manifest sign (was here)? And with this very thing, he put all in fear: for, said they, Hither also is he come for this very thing. But all that heard him were amazed, and said: Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came

hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?

But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ. (v. 21, 22.) As one learned in the Law, he stopped their mouths, and suffered them not to speak. They thought they were rid of disputation in such matters, in getting rid of Stephen, and they found another, more vehement than Stephen.

(Recapitulation.) But let us look at what relates to Ananias. The Lord said not to him, Converse with him, and catechize him. For if, when He said, He prays, and has seen a man laying his hands upon him, (v. 11, 12.) He did not persuade him, much less had He said this. So that he shall not disbelieve you, he has seen in a vision. Observe how in the former instance neither is Philip told all immediately. Fear not, He says: for this man is a chosen vessel for Me. Acts 9:15 He more than sufficiently released him of his fear, if the case be so that this man shall be so zealous in our cause, as even to suffer many things.

And justly he is called a vessel (or, instrument)-- for reason shows that evil is not a physical quality: a vessel of election (or, chosen instrument), He says; for we choose that which is approved. And let not any imagine, that (Ananias) speaks in unbelief of what was told him, as imagining that Christ was deceived: far from it! But affrighted and trembling, he did not even attend to what was said, at hearing the name of Paul. Moreover, the Lord does not tell that He has blinded him: at the mention of his name fear had prepossessed his soul: see, he says, to whom You are betraying me: 'and hither for this very purpose is he come, to bind all that call upon Your Name.'

I fear, lest he take me to Jerusalem: why dost Thou cast me into the mouth of the lion? He is terrified, even while he speaks these words; that from every quarter we may learn the energetic character (■ πετ■v) of the man. For that these things should be spoken by Jews, were nothing wonderful: but that these (the believers) are so terrified, it is a most mighty proof of the power of God. Both the fear is shown, and the obedience greater after the fear. For there was indeed need of strength.

Since He says, a vessel of election, that you may not imagine that God is to do all, He adds, to bear My Name before Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel. Ananias has heard what he most desired -- that against the Jews also he will take his stand: this above all gave him courage. For I, says He, will show him how great things he must suffer for My Name's sake. At the same time also this is said by way of putting Ananias to the blush: If he, that was so frantic, shall suffer all things, and thou not willing even to baptize him!

It is well, says he: let him continue blind (this is why he says these words): he is blind: why dost Thou at all bid me open his eyes, that he may bind (men) again? Fear not the future: for that opening of his eyes he will use not against you, but for you (with reference to that saying, That he may receive his sight Acts 9:12, these words are spoken): for not only will he do you no harm, but he will suffer many things. And what is wonderful indeed is, that he shall first know how great things he shall suffer, and then shall take the field against the perils.-- Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus -- he says not, Who made you blind, but, Who appeared with you in the way, has sent me unto you that you may receive your sight Acts 9:17: observe this man also, how he utters nothing boastful, but just as Peter said in the case of the lame man, Why look ye on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made him to walk, Acts 3:12 so here also he says, Jesus, Who appeared unto you. (b) Or, (he says it) that the other may believe: and he says not, He that was crucified, the Son of God, He that does wonders: but what?

He that appeared unto you: (speaking) from what the other knew: as Christ also added no more, neither said, I am Jesus, the Crucified, the Risen: but what? Whom you persecute. Ananias said not, The persecuted, that he may not seem as it were to rave over him (■ πένθους■& 139-ν), to deride him, Who appeared unto you in the way: and yet He did not (visibly) appear, but was seen by the things done. And immediately he added, wishing to draw a veil over the accusation: That you may receive your sight.

I came not to reprove the past, but to bestow the gift: that you may receive your sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. (a) With hands laid on, he spoke these words. And immediately there fell from his eyes, etc. Acts 9:18: a double blindness is removed.-- And why says it, Having taken food, he was strengthened? Acts 9:19 Because they that are in such case become relaxed: he had no heart to partake of food before, until he obtained the mighty gifts. (c) It seems to me, that both Paul and Cornelius, at the very instant when the words were spoken, received the Spirit.

And yet (in this case) the giver was no great one. So true is it, that there was naught of man's in the things done, nor anything was done by man, but God was present, the Doer of these things. And at the same time (the Lord) both teaches him to think modestly of himself, in that He does not bring him to the Apostles who were so admired, and shows that there is nothing of man here. He was not filled, however, with the Spirit which works signs: that in this way also his faith might be shown; for he wrought no miracles.

And straightway, it says, in the synagogues he preached Jesus -- Acts 9:20 not that He is risen -- not this: no, nor that He lives: but what? Immediately he strictly expounded the doctrine -- that this is the Son of God. And all that heard him were amazed, etc. Acts 9:21 They were reduced to utter incredulity. And yet they ought not to have wondered only, but to worship and reverence. Is not this he, etc. He had not merely been a persecutor, but destroyed them which called on this Name -- they did not say, on Jesus; for hatred, they could not bear even to hear His name -- and what is more marvellous still, and came hither for this purpose, etc.

We cannot say, that he associated with the Apostles before. See by how many (witnesses) he is confessed to have been of the number of the enemies! But Paul not only was not confounded by these things, nor hid his face for shame, but increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews Acts 9:22, i.e. put them to silence, left them nothing to say for themselves, proving, that this is very Christ. Teaching, it says: for this man was a teacher.

And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him. Acts 9:23 The Jews again resort to that valid argument (■ σχυρ■ν συλλογισμ■ν) of theirs, not now seeking false-accusers and false-witnesses; they cannot wait for these now: but what do they? They set about it by themselves. For as they see the affair on the increase, they do not even use the form of a trial. But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him. Acts 9:24 For this was more intolerable to them than the miracles which had taken place -- than the five thousand, the three thousand, than everything, in short. And observe him, how he is delivered, not by (miraculous) grace, but by man's wisdom -- not as the apostles were -- ■ κε■νοι, Acts 5:19 that you may learn the energetic (■ πετ■ν) character of the man, how he shines even without miracles. Then the disciples took him by night, that the affair might not be suspected, and let him down by the wall in a basket. Acts 9:25 What then? Having escaped such a danger, does he flee? By no means, but goes where he kindled them to greater rage.

(Recapitulation, v. 20, 21.) And straightway in the synagogues he preached Jesus -- for he was accurate in the faith-- that this is the Son of God. But all that heard him were amazed, etc., for indeed it was

incredible. But Saul increased, etc. Therefore after many days this happens: viz. the Jews took counsel to kill him. And their laying await was known of Saul. Acts 22:22-24 What does this mean? It is likely that for awhile he did not choose to depart thence, though many, perhaps, besought him; but when he learned it, then he permitted his disciples: for he had disciples immediately.

Then the disciples, etc. Acts 9:25 Of this occurrence he says: The ethnarch of Aretas the king kept the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to apprehend me. 2 Corinthians 11:32 But observe the Writer here, that he does not tell the story ambitiously, and so as to show what an important person Paul was, saying, For they stirred up the king, and so forth: but only, Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall -- in a basket: for they sent him out alone, and none with him.

And it was well they did this: the consequence being, that he showed himself to the Apostles in Jerusalem. Now they sent him out, as bound to provide for his safety by flight: but he did just the contrary -- he leaped into the midst of those who were mad against him. This it is to be on fire, this to be fervent indeed! From that day forth he knew all the commands which the Apostles had heard: Except a man take up his cross, and follow Me. Matthew 10:38 The very fact that he had been slower to come than the rest made him more zealous: for to whom much is forgiven Luke 7:47 the same will love more, so that the later he came, the more he loved: * * * and having done ten thousand wrongs, he thought he could never do enough to cast the former deeds into the shade.

Proving Acts 9:22, it says: i.e. with mildness teaching. And observe, they did not say to him, You are he that destroyed: why are you changed? For they were ashamed: but they said it to themselves. For he would have said to them, This very thing ought to teach you, as in fact he does thus plead in his speech before Agrippa. Let us imitate this, man: let us bear our souls in our hands ready to confront all dangers.-- (That he fled from Damascus) this was no cowardice: he preserved himself for the preaching.

Had he been a coward, he would not have gone to Jerusalem, would not immediately have commenced teaching: he would have abated somewhat of his vehemence: for he had been taught by the fate of Stephen. He was no coward, but he was also prudent (οικονομικός) (in husbanding himself). Wherefore he thought it no great thing to die for the Gospel's sake, unless he should do this to great advantage: willing not even to see Christ, Whom most of all he longed to see, while the work of his stewardship among men was not yet complete.

Philippians 1:23-24. Such ought to be the soul of a Christian. From his first appearance from the very outset, the character of Paul declared itself: nay even before this, even in the things which he did not according to knowledge Romans 10:2, it was not by man's reasoning that he was moved to act as he did. For if, so long afterwards, he was content not to depart, much more at the beginning of his trading voyage, when he had but just left the harbor! Many things Christ leaves to be done by (ordinary) human wisdom, that we may learn that (his disciples) were men, that it was not all everywhere to be done by grace: for otherwise they would have been mere motionless logs: but in many things they managed matters themselves.-- This is not less than martyrdom -- to shrink from no suffering for the sake of the salvation of the many.

Nothing so delights God. Again will I repeat what I have often said: and I repeat it, because I do exceedingly desire it: as Christ also did the same, when discoursing concerning forgiveness: When ye pray, forgive if you have anything against any man: Mark 11:25 and again to Peter He said, I say not unto you, Forgive until seven times, but until seventy-times seven. Matthew 18:22 And Himself in fact forgives

the transgressions against Him. So do we also, because we know that this is the very goal of Christianity, continually discourse thereof.

Nothing is more frigid than a Christian, who cares not for the salvation of others. You can not here plead poverty: for she that cast down the two mites, shall be your accuser. Luke 21:1 And Peter said, Silver and gold have I none. Acts 3:6 And Paul was so poor, that he was often hungered, and wanted necessary food. You can not plead lowness of birth: for they too were ignoble men, and of ignoble parents. You can not allege want of education: for they too were unlearned men.

Acts 4:13 Even if you be a slave therefore and a runaway slave, you can perform your part: for such was Onesimus: yet see to what Paul calls him, and to how great honor he advances him: that he may communicate with me, he says, in my bonds. Philemon 13 You can not plead infirmity: for such was Timothy, having often infirmities; for, says the apostle, Use a little wine for your stomach's sake, and your frequent infirmities. 1 Timothy 5:23 Every one can profit his neighbor, if he will fulfil his part.

See ye not the unfruitful trees, how strong they are, how fair, how large also, and smooth, and of great height? But if we had a garden; we should much rather have pomegranates, or fruitful olive trees: for the others are for delight to the eye, not for profit, which in them is but small. Such are those men who only consider their own interest: nay, not such even since these persons are fit only for burning: whereas those trees are useful both for building and for the safety of those within.

Such too were those Virgins, chaste indeed, and decent, and modest, but profitable to none Matthew 25:1 wherefore they are burned. Such are they who have not nourished Christ. For observe that none of those are charged with particular sins of their own, with fornication, for instance, or with perjury; in short, with no sin but the having been of no use to another. Such was he who buried his talent, showing indeed a blameless life, but not being useful to another. Matthew 25:25 How can such an one be a Christian?

Say, if the leaven being mixed up with the flour did not change the whole into its own nature, would such a thing be leaven? Again, if a perfume shed no sweet odor on those who approach it, could we call it a perfume? Say not, It is impossible for me to induce others (to become Christians)-- for if you are a Christian, it is impossible but that it should be so. For as the natural properties of things cannot be gainsaid, so it is here: the thing is part of the very nature of the Christian.

Do not insult God. To say, that the sun cannot shine, would be to insult Him: to say that a Christian cannot do good, is to insult God, and call Him a liar. For it is easier for the sun not to give heat, nor to shine, than for the Christian not to send forth light: it is easier for the light to be darkness, than for this to be so. Tell me not that it is impossible: the contrary is the impossible. Do not insult God. If we once get our own affairs in a right state, the other will certainly follow as a natural and necessary consequence.

It is not possible for the light of a Christian to be hid; not possible for a lamp so conspicuous as that to be concealed. Let us not be careless. For, as the profit from virtue reaches both to ourselves, and to those who are benefited by it: so from vice there is a two-fold loss, reaching both to ourselves, and to those who are injured by it. Let there be (if you will) some private man, who has suffered numberless ills from some one, and let no one take his part, yet let that man still return good offices; what teaching so mighty as this?

What words, or what exhortations could equal it? What wrath were it not enough to extinguish and soften? Knowing therefore these things, let us hold fast to virtue, as knowing that it is not possible to be saved otherwise, than by passing through this present life in doing these good works, that we may also obtain

the good things which are to come, through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father together with the Holy Spirit be glory, might, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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