

Homily 36 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer and vigilance in our lives, using the example of Paul and Silas in Acts 16:25-26 and the conversion of the jailer as illustrations of God's power and presence.

Scripture: Psalm 95:2, Luke 11:13, Acts 16:25-36

Topics: "Faith And Perseverance", "Salvation Through Prayer"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the powerful story of Paul and Silas in Acts 16, highlighting their unwavering faith and praise to God even in the midst of trials and imprisonment. Despite their suffering, they remained vigilant and filled with exceeding delight, leading to a miraculous earthquake that shook the prison and opened all the doors. The jailer, witnessing this extraordinary event, was moved to ask Paul and Silas how to be saved, leading to his conversion and baptism, along with his entire household. Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of genuine prayer, forgiveness, and perseverance in seeking God's mercy and salvation.

Transcript

Acts XVI. 25, 26

And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed.

What could equal these souls? These men had been scourged, had received many stripes, they had been misused, were in peril of their lives, were thrust into the inner prison, and set fast in the stocks: and for all this they did not suffer themselves to sleep, but kept vigil all the night. Do you mark what a blessing tribulation is? But we, in our soft beds, with none to be afraid of, pass the whole night in sleep. But belike this is why they kept vigil, because they were in this condition.

Not the tyranny of sleep could overpower them, not the smart of pain could bow them, not the fear of evil east them into helpless dejection: no, these were the very things that made them wakeful: and they were even filled with exceeding delight. At midnight, it says, and the prisoners listened to them: it was so strange and surprising! And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken, and immediately, all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed.

And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled. Acts 16:27 There was an earthquake, that the keeper should be roused from sleep, and the doors flew open, that he should wonder at what had happened: but these things the prisoners saw not: otherwise they would all have fled: but the keeper of the prison was about to slay himself, thinking the prisoners were escaped.

But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do yourself no harm: for we are all here Acts 16:28 (b) Then he called for lights, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas; and brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? (v. 29, 30.) Do you mark how the wonder overpowered him? (a) He wondered more at Paul's kindness; he was amazed at his manly boldness, that he had not escaped when he had it in his power, that he hindered him from killing himself. (c) And they said, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, and your house.

And they spoke unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. (v. 31, 35) and (so) immediately gave proof of their kindness towards him. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway. Acts 16:33 He washed them, and was himself baptized, he and his house. And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house. And when it was day, the magistrates sent the sergeants, saying, Let those men go. (v. 34, 35.)

It is likely the magistrates had learned what had happened, and did not dare of themselves to dismiss them. And the keeper of the prison told these words to Paul, saying, the magistrates have sent to let you go: now therefore depart, and go in peace. But Paul said to them, they have beaten us openly uncondemned, being Romans, and have cast us into prison; and now do they thrust us out privily? Nay verily; but let them come themselves and fetch us out. And the sergeants told these words unto the magistrates: and they feared, when they heard that they were Romans.

And they came and besought them, and brought them out, and desired them to depart out of the city. And they went out of the prison, and entered into the house of Lydia: and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed. Acts 16:36-40 Even upon the declaration of the magistrates Paul does not go out, but for the sake both of Lydia and the rest he puts them in fear: that they may not be supposed to have come out upon their own request, that they may set the rest in a posture of boldness. The impeachment was twofold: that being Romans, and uncondemned, they had openly cast them into prison. You see that in many things they took their measures as men.

(Recapitulation) And at midnight, etc. Acts 16:25 Let us compare, beloved, with that night these nights of ours, with their revellings, their drunkenness, and wanton excesses, with their sleep which might as well be death, their watchings which are worse than sleep. For while some sleep without sense or feeling, others lie awake to pitiable and wretched purpose, plotting deceits, anxiously thinking about money, studying how they may be revenged upon those who do them wrong, meditating enmity, reckoning up the abusive words spoken during the day: thus do they rake up the smouldering embers of wrath, doing things intolerable. Mark how Peter slept. Acts 12:6 Both there, it was wisely ordered (that he should be asleep); for the Angel came to him, and it behooved that none should see what happened; and on the other hand it was well ordered here (that Paul should be awake), in order that the keeper of the prison might be prevented from killing himself. And suddenly there was a great earthquake. Acts 16:26 And why did no other miracle take place? Because this was, of all others, the thing sufficient for his conversion, seeing he was personally in danger: for it is not so much miracles that overpower us, as the things which issue in our

own deliverance. That the earthquake should not seem to have come of itself, there was this concurrent circumstance, bearing witness to it: the doors were opened, and all their bonds were loosed. And it appears in the night-time; for the Apostles did not work for display, but for men's salvation. And the keeper of the prison, etc. Acts 16:27 The keeper was not an evil-disposed man that he thrust them into the inner prison, Acts 16:24 was because of his having received such a command, not of himself. The man was all in a tumult of perturbation. What shall I do to be saved? he asks. Why not before this? Paul shouted, until he saw, and is beforehand with him saying, We are all here. And having called for lights, it says, he sprang in, and fell down at the feet of the prisoner; he, the prison keeper, saying, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? Acts 16:28-30 Why, what had they said? Observe, he does not, on finding himself safe, think all is well; he is overcome with awe at the miraculous power.

Do you mark what happened in the former case, and what here? There a girl was released from a spirit, and they cast them into prison, because they had liberated her from the spirit. Here, they did but show the doors standing open, and it opened the doors of his heart, it loosed two sorts of chains; that (prisoner) kindled the (true) light; for the light in his heart was shining. And he sprang in, and fell before them; and he does not ask, How is this? What is this? But straightway he says, What must I do to be saved?

What then answers Paul? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, you and your house. Acts 16:31 For this above all, wins men: that one's house also should be saved. And they spoke the word to him, and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes, etc. (v. 32, 33), washed them and was washed: those he washed from their stripes, himself was washed from his sins: he fed and was fed. And rejoiced, it says: although there was nothing but words only and good hopes: having believed in God with all his house Acts 16:34: this was the token of his having believed-- that he was released of all.

What worse than a jailer, what more ruthless, more savage? He entertained them with great honor. Not, because he was safe, he made merry, but, having believed God. (a) Believe in the Lord, said the Apostle: therefore it is that the writer here says, Having believed. -- (d) Now therefore, it says, depart, and go in peace Acts 16:36: that is, in safety, fearing no man. (b) But Paul said to them Acts 16:37: that he may not seem to be receiving his liberty as one condemned, and as one that has done wrong: therefore it is that he says, Having openly beaten us uncondemned, etc.-- that it may not be matter of grace on their part. (e) And besides, they wish the jailer himself to be out of danger, that he may not be called to account for this afterwards.

And they do not say, Having beaten us, who have wrought miracles: for they (the magistrates) did not even heed these: but, that which was most effectual to shake their minds, uncondemned, and being Romans. (c) Observe how diversely grace manages things: how Peter went out, how Paul, though both were Apostles. They feared, Acts 16:38 it says: because the men were Romans, not because they had unjustly cast them into prison, And besought them to depart out of the city Acts 16:39: begged them as a favor.

And they went to the house of Lydia, and having confirmed her, so departed. For it was not right to leave their hostess in distress and anxiety. But they went out, not in compliance with the request of those rulers, but hasting to the preaching: the city having been sufficiently benefited by the miracle: for it was fit they should not be there any longer. For in the absence of them that wrought it, the miracle appeared greater, itself crying out more loudly: the faith of the jailer was a voice in itself. What equal to this? He is put in bonds, and looses, being bound: looses a twofold bond: him that bound him, he looses by being bound.

These are indeed works of (supernatural) grace.

(f) Let us constantly bear in mind this jailer, not the miracle: how, prisoner as he was (the Apostle), persuaded his jailer. What say the heathen? And of what things, say they, was such a man as this to be persuaded -- a vile, wretched creature, of no understanding, full of all that is bad and nothing else, and easily brought over to anything? For these, say they, are the things, a tanner, a purple-seller, an eunuch, slaves, and women believed. This is what they say. What then will they be able to say, when we produce the men of rank and station, the centurion, the proconsul, those from that time to the present, the rulers themselves, the emperors?

But for my part, I speak of something else, greater than this: let us look to these very persons of no consideration. And where is the wonder? say you. Why, this, I say, is a wonder. For, if a person be persuaded about any common things, it is no wonder: but if resurrection, a kingdom of heaven, a life of philosophic self-command, be the subjects, and, discoursing of these to persons of mean consideration, one persuades them, it will be more wonderful than if one persuaded wise men.

For when there is no danger attending the things of which one persuades people, then (the objector) might with some plausibility allege want of sense on their part: but when (the preacher) says -- to the slave, as you will have it -- If you be persuaded by me, it is at your peril, you will have all men for your enemies, you must die, you must suffer evils without number, and yet for all this, convinces that man's soul, there can be no more talk here of want of sense. Since, if indeed the doctrines contained what was pleasant, one might fairly enough say this: but if, what the philosophers would never have chosen to learn, this the slave does learn, then is the wonder greater.

And, if you will, let us bring before us the tanner himself, and see what were the subjects on which Peter conversed with him: or if you will, this same jailer. What then said Paul to him? That Christ rose again, say you; that there is a resurrection of the dead, and a kingdom: and he had no difficulty in persuading him, a man easily led to anything. How? Said he nothing about the mode of life; that he must be temperate, that he must be superior to money, that he must not be unmerciful, that he must impart of his good things to others?

For it cannot be said, that the being persuaded to these things also was from the want of power of mind; no, to be brought to all this required a great soul. For be it so, that as far as the doctrines went, they were rendered more apt to receive these by their want of intelligence: but to accept such a virtuous, self-denying rule of life, how could that be owing to any defect of understanding? So that the less understanding the person may have, if nevertheless he is persuaded to things, to which even philosophers were unable to persuade their fellow philosophers, the greater the wonder -- when women and slaves are persuaded of these truths, and prove it by their actions, of which same truths the Platos and all the rest of them were never able to persuade any man.

And why say I, any man? Say rather, not themselves even: on the contrary, that money is not to be despised, Plato persuaded (his disciples) by getting, as he did, such an abundance of property, and golden rings, and goblets; and that the honor to be had from the many is not to be despised, this Socrates himself shows, for all that he may philosophize without end on this point: for in everything he did, he had an eye to fame. And if you were conversant with his discourses, I might go at great length into this subject, and show what a deal of insincerity (εἰρωνεῖα) there was in them -- if at least we may believe what his disciple says of him -- and how that all his writings have their ground-work in vainglory.

But, leaving them, let us direct the discourse to our own selves. For besides the things that have been said, there is this also to be added, that men were persuaded of these things to their own peril. Be not thou therefore shameless, but let us think over that night, the stocks, and the hymns of praise. This let us also do, and we shall open for ourselves -- not a prison, but -- heaven. If we pray, we shall be able even to open heaven. Elias both shut and opened heaven by prayer.

James 5:17 There is a prison in heaven also. Whatsoever, He says, you shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven. Matthew 16:19 Let us pray by night, and we shall loose these bonds. For that prayers loose sins, let that widow convince us, let that friend convince us, who at that untimely hour of the night persists and knocks Luke 11:5: let Cornelius convince us, for, your prayers, it says, and your alms have come up before God. Acts 10:4 Let Paul convince us, who says, Now she that is a widow indeed and desolate, trusts in God, and continues in supplications night and day. 1 Timothy 5:5 If he speaks thus of a widow, a weak woman, much more would he of men.

I have both before discoursed to you on this, and now repeat it: let us arouse ourselves during the night: though thou make not many prayers, make one with watchfulness, and it is enough, I ask no more: and if not at midnight, at any rate at the first dawn. Show that the night is not only for the body, but also for the soul: do not suffer it to pass idly, but make this return to your Master: nay rather (the benefit) itself returns to you. Say, if we fall into any difficult strait, to whom do we not make request?

And if we soon obtain our request, we breathe freely again. What a boon were it for you, to have a friend to go to with your request, who shall be ready to take it as a kindness, and to be obliged to you for your asking? What a boon, not to have to go about and seek one to ask of, but to find one ready? To have no need of others through whom you may solicit? What could be greater than this? Since here is One who then does most, when we make not our requests of others than Himself: just as a sincere friend then most complains of us for not trusting in his friendship, when we ask of others to make request to him.

Thus also let us act. But what, you will ask, if I should have offended Him? Cease to give offense, and weep, and so draw near to Him, and you will quickly render Him propitious as to your former sins. Say only, I have offended: say it from your soul and with a sincere mind, and all things are remitted to you. Thou dost not so much desire your sins to be forgiven, as He desires to forgive you your sins. In proof that thou dost not so desire it, consider that you have no mind either to practice vigils, or to give your money freely: but He, that He might forgive our sins, spared not His Only-begotten and True Son, the partner of His throne.

Do you see how He more desires to forgive you your sins (than thou to be forgiven)? Then let us not be slothful, nor put off this any longer. He is merciful and good: only let us give Him an opportunity.

And (even) this (He seeks), only that we may not become unprofitable, since even without this He could have freed us from them: but like as we (with the same view) devise and arrange many things for our servants to do, so does He in the matter of our salvation. Let us anticipate His face with thanksgiving. Psalm 95:2. Let us come before His presence. E.V., since He is good and kind. But if you call not upon Him, what will He do? Thou dost not choose to say, Forgive; you will not say it from your heart, but with your mouth only. What is it, to call in truth? (To call) with purpose of heart, with earnestness, with a sincere mind; just as men say of perfumes, This is genuine, and has nothing spurious, so here. He who truly calls on Him, he who truly prays to Him, continually attends to it, and desists not, until he obtain (his request): but he who does it in a merely formal manner (■ φοσιο■μενος), and even this only by way of fulfilling a

law, does not call in truth. Whosoever you are, say not only, I am a sinner, but be earnest also to rid yourself of this character; say not this only, but also grieve. If you grieve, you are in earnest: if you are not in earnest, you grieve not: if you grieve not, you trifle. What sort of man is he who shall say, I am sick, and not to do all to be freed from his sickness? A mighty weapon is Prayer. If you, says the Lord, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more your Father? Luke 11:13 Then wherefore are you unwilling to approach Him? He loves you, He is of more power than all besides. Both willing is He and able, what is there to hinder? Nothing. But then, on our part, let us draw near with faith, draw near, offering the gifts that He desires, forgetfulness of wrongs, kindness, meekness. Though thou be a sinner, with boldness shall you ask of Him forgiveness of your sins, if you can show that this has been done by yourself: but though thou be righteous, and possess not this virtue of forgetfulness of injuries, you are none the better for it. It cannot be that a man who has forgiven his neighbor should not obtain perfect forgiveness: for God is beyond comparison more merciful than we. What do you say? If you say, I have been wronged, I have subdued my anger, I have endured the onset of wrath because of Your command, and dost Thou not forgive? Full surely He will forgive: and this is plain to all. Therefore let us purge our soul from all resentment. This is sufficient for us, in order that we may be heard; and let us pray with watching and much perseverance, that having enjoyed His bountiful mercy, we may be found worthy of the good things promised, 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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