On the Holy Martyr, S. Babylas

John Chrysostom (c. AD 349–407)

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1. I Was anxious to-day to pay the debt which I promised you when I was lately here. But what am I to do? In the meanwhile, the blessed Babylas has appeared, and has called me to himself, uttering no voice, but attracting our attention by the brightness of his countenance. Be ye not, therefore, displeased at the delay in my payment; at all events, the longer the time is, the more the interest will increase. For we will deposit this money with interest. Since thus did the master command who entrusted it to us. Being confident, therefore, about what is lent, that both the principal and the profit await you, let us not pass by the gain which falls in our way to-day, but revel in the noble actions of the blessed Babylas.

How, indeed, he presided over the Church which is among us, and saved that sacred ship, in storm, and in wave, and billow; and what a bold front he showed to the emperor, and how he lay down his life for the sheep and underwent that blessed slaughter; these things and such as these, we will leave to the elder among our teachers, and to our common father, to speak of. For the more remote matters, the aged can relate to you but as many things as happened lately, and within our lifetime, these, I a young man will relate to you, I mean those after death, those after the burial of the martyr, those which happened while he remained in the suburbs of the city. And I know indeed that the Greeks will laugh at my promise, if I promise to speak of the noble deeds after death and burial of one who was buried, and had crumbled to dust. We shall not assuredly on this account keep silence, but on this very account shall especially speak, in order that by showing this marvel truly, we may turn their laughter upon their own head. For of an ordinary man there would be no noble deeds after death.

But of a martyr, many and great deeds, not in order that he might become more illustrious (for he has no need of glory from the multitude), but that thou, the unbeliever mayest learn that the death of the martyrs is not death, but the beginning of a better life, and the prelude of a more spiritual conversation, and a change from the worse to the better. Do not then look at the fact, that the mere body of the martyr lies destitute of energy of soul; but observe this, that a greater power takes its place by the side of it, different from the soul itself-I mean the grace of the Holy Spirit, which pleads to all on behalf of the resurrection, by means of the wonders which it works. For if God has granted greater power to bodies dead and crumbled to dust, than to all living, much more will he grant to them a better life than the former,

and a longer, at the time of the bestowal of his crowns; what then are this saint's noble deeds? But be not disturbed, if we take our discourse a little further back. For they who wish to display their portraits to advantage, do not uncover them until they have placed the spectators a little way off from the picture, making the view clearer by the distance. Do you then also have patience with me while I direct my discourse into the past.

For when Julian who surpassed all in impiety, ascended the imperial throne, and grasped the despotic sceptre, straightway he lifted up his hands against the God who created him, and ignored his benefactor, and looking from the earth beneath to the heavens, howled after the manner of mad dogs, who alike bay at those who do not feed them and those who do feed them. But he rather was mad with a more savage madness than theirs. For they indeed turn from, and hate their friends and strangers alike. But this man used to fawn upon demons, strangers to his salvation, and used to worship them with every mode of worship. But his benefactor, and Saviour, and him who spared not the only Begotten, for his sake, he turned from and used to hate, and made havoc of the cross, the very thing which uplifted the whole world when it was lying prostrate, and drave away the darkness on all sides, and brought in light more brilliant than the sunbeams; nor yet even then did he desist from his frenzy, but promised that he would tear the nation of the Galilaeans, out of the midst of the world; for thus he was wont to call us; and yet if he thought the names of the Christians an abomination, and Christianity itself to be full of much shame, for what reason did he not desire to put us to shame by that means, but with a strange name?

Yea because he knew clearly, that to be called by what belongs to Christ, is a great ornament not only to men, but to angels, and to the powers above. On this account he set everything in motion, so as to strip us of this ornament, and put a stop to the preaching of it. But this was impossible, O wretched and miserable man! as it was impossible to destroy the heaven and to quench the sun, and to shake and cast down the foundations of the earth, and those things Christ foretold, thus saying: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

Well, thou dost not submit to Christ's words; accept therefore the utterance which thus his deeds give. For I indeed having been privileged to know what the declaration of God is, how strong, how invincible a thing, have believed that is more trustworthy than the order of nature, and than experience in all matters. But do thou still creeping on the ground, and agitated with the investigations of human reasoning, receive the witness of the deeds. I gainsay nothing. I strive not. 2. What then do the deeds say? Christ said that it was easier for heaven and earth to be destroyed, than for any of his words to fail. The emperor contradicted these words, and threatened to destroy his decrees. Where then is the emperor who threatened these things? He is perished and is corrupted, and is now in Hades, awaiting the inevitable punishment. But where is Christ who uttered these decrees? In Heaven, on the right hand of the Father, occupying the highest throne of glory; where are the blasphemous words of the Emperor, and his unchastened tongue? They are become ashes, and dust and the food of worms. Where is the sentence of Christ? It shines forth by the very truth of the

deed, receiving its lustre from the issue of the events, as from a golden column. And yet the emperor left nothing undone, when about to raise war against us, but used to call prophets together, and summon sorcerers, and everything was full of demons and evil spirits.

What then was the return for this worship? The overturning of cities, the bitterest famine of all famines. For ye know doubtless, and remember, how empty indeed the market place was of wares, and the workshops full of confusion, when everyone strove to snatch up what came first and to depart. And why do I speak of famine, when the very fountains of waters were failing, fountains which by the abundance of their stream, used to eclipse the rivers. But since I have mentioned the fountains, come, forthwith, let us go up to Daphne, and conduct our discourse to the noble deeds of the martyr. Although you desire me still to parade the indecencies of the Greeks, although I too desire this, let us abstain; for wherever the commemoration of a martyr is, there certainly also is the shame of the Greeks. This emperor then, going up to Daphne used to weary Apollo, praying, supplicating, entreating, so that the events of the future might be foretold to him. What then did the prophet, the great God of the Greeks? "The dead prevent me from uttering," saith he, "but break open the graves, dig up the bones, move the dead. What could be more impious than these commands? The Demon of grave-robbing, introduces strange laws and devises new methods of expelling strangers. Who ever heard of the dead being driven forth? who ever saw lifeless bodies ordered to be moved as he commanded, overturning from their foundations the common laws of nature.

For the laws of nature are common to all men, that he who departs this life should be hidden in the earth, and delivered over for burial, and be covered up in the bosom of the earth the mother of all; and these laws, neither Greek, barbarian, Scythian, nor if there be any more savage than they, ever changed, but all reverence them, and keep them, and thus they are sacred and venerated by all. But the Demon raises his mask, and with bare head, resists the common laws of nature. For the dead, he says, are a pollution. The dead are not a pollution, a most wicked demon, but a wicked intention is an abomination. But if one must say something startling, the bodies of the living full of evil, are more polluting than those of the dead. For the one minister to the behests of the mind, but the other lie unmoved. Now that which is unmoved, and destitute of all perception would be free from all accusation. Not that I even would say that the bodies of the living are by nature polluting; but that everywhere a wicked and perverted intention is open to accusations from all.

The dead body then is not a pollution O Apollo, but to persecute a maiden who wishes to be modest, and to outrage the dignity of a virgin, and to lament at the failure of the shameless deed, this is worthy of accusation, and punishment. There were at all events, many wonderful and great prophets among ourselves, who spake also many things concerning the future, and they in no case used to bid those who asked them to dig up the bones of the departed. Yea Ezekiel standing near the bones themselves was not only not hindered by them, but added flesh, and nerves and skin to them, and brought them back to life again. But the great Moses did not stand near the bones of the dead, but bearing off the whole dead

body of Joseph, thus foretold things to come. And very reasonably, for their words were the grace of the Holy Spirit. But the words of these, a deceit, and a lie which is no wise able to be concealed. For that these things were an excuse, and pretence and that he feared the blessed Babylas, is manifest from what the emperor did. For leaving all the other dead, he only moved that martyr. And yet if he did these things, in disgust at him, and not in fear, it were necessary that he should order the coffin to be broken, thrown into the sea, carried to the desert, be made to disappear by some other method of destruction; for this is the part of one who is disgusted. Thus God did when he spake to the Hebrews about the abominations of the Gentiles. He bade their statues to be broken, not to bring their abominations from the suburbs to the city.

3. The martyr then was moved, but the demon not even then enjoyed freedom from fear, but straightway learned that it is possible to move the bones of a martyr, but not to escape his hands. For as soon as the coffin was drawn into the city, a thunderbolt came from above upon the head of his image, and burnt it all up. And yet, if not before, then at least there was likelihood that the impious emperor would be angry, and that he would send forth his anger against the testimony of the martyr. But not even then did he dare, so great fear possessed him. But although he saw that the burning was intolerable, and knew the cause accurately; he kept quiet. And this is not only wonderful that he did not destroy the testimony, but that he not even dared to put the roof on to the temple again. For he knew, he knew, that the stroke was divinely sent, and he feared lest by forming any further plan, he should call down that fire upon his own head. On this account he endured to see the shrine of Apollo brought to so great desolation; For there was no other cause, on account of which he did not rectify that which had happened, but fear alone. For which reason he unwillingly kept quiet, and knowing this left as much reproach to the demon, as distinction to the martyr. For the walls are now standing, instead of trophies, uttering a voice clearer than a trumpet.

To those in Daphne, to those in the city, to those who arrive from far off, to those who are with us, to those men which shall be hereafter, they declare everything by their appearance, the wrestling, the struggle, the victory of the martyr. For it is likely that he who dwells far off from the suburb, when he sees the chapel of the saint deprived of a shrine, and the temple of Apollo deprived of its roof would ask the reason of each of these things; and then after learning the whole history would depart hence. Such are the noble deeds of the martyr after death, wherefore I count your city blessed, that ye have shown much zeal about this holy man. For then, when he returned from Daphne, all our city poured forth into the road, and the market places were empty of men, and the houses were empty of women, and the bedchambers were destitute of maidens. Thus also every age and each sex passed forth from the city, as if to receive a father long absent who was returning from sojourn far away. And you indeed gave him back to the band of fellow enthusiasts. But the grace of God did not suffer him to remain there for good, but again removed him beyond the river, so that many parts of the country were filled with the sweet savor of the martyr.

Neither even when he came hither was he destined to be alone, but he quickly received, a neighbor, and a fellow-lodger, and one of similar life. For he shared with him the same dignity, and for the sake of religion shewed forth equal boldness. Wherefore he obtained the same abode as he, this wonderful man being no vain imitator, as it seems, of the martyr. For for so long a time he laboured there, sending letters continually to the emperor, wearying the authorities, and bringing he ministry of the body to bear upon the martyr. For ye know, doubtless, and remember that when the midday summer sun possessed the heaven, he together with his acquaintances, used to walk thither everyday, not as spectator only, but also, as intending to be a sharer in what was going on. For he often handled stone, and dragged a rope, and listened, in advance of the workmen themselves, to one who wanted to erect any building, For he knew, he knew what rewards lie in store for him for these things. And on this account he continued doing service to the martyrs, not only by splendid buildings nor even by continual feasts, but by a better method than these. And what is this? He imitates their life, emulates their courage, throughout according to his ability he keeps the image of the martyrs alive, in himself. For see, they gave their bodies to the slaughter, he has mortified the members of his flesh which are upon the earth.

They stopped the flame of fire, he quenched the flame of lust. They fought against the teeth of beasts, but this man bore off the most dangerous of our passions, anger. For all these things let us give thanks to God, because he hath thus granted us noble martyrs, and pastors worthy of martyrs, for the perfecting of the saints, for the edifying of the body of Christ with whom be glory, honor, and might to the Father, with the Holy and lifegiving Spirit, now and always, for ever and ever. Amen.

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.