

1 Thessalonians 5:1, 2

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of watchfulness and sobriety in preparation for the day of the Lord, and the hope of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 24:42, Ephesians 6:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:8-9

Topics: "End Times", "Spiritual Armor"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the uncertainty of the day of the Lord's coming, likening it to a thief in the night, urging believers to be vigilant and not indulge in curiosity about the end times. He highlights the importance of faith, love, and hope as spiritual armor to guard against the temptations of vice and the distractions of the world. Chrysostom urges listeners to live as 'sons of light' and 'sons of the day,' being sober, watchful, and prepared for the return of Christ, reminding them that God has appointed them to obtain salvation through Jesus Christ.

Transcript

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that anything be written unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.

Nothing, as it seems, is so curious, and so fondly prone to pry into things obscure and concealed, as the nature of men. And this is wont to happen to it, when the mind is unsettled and in an imperfect state. For the simpler sort of children never cease teasing their nurses, and tutors, and parents, with their frequent questions, in which there is nothing else but when will this be? and when that? And this comes to pass also from living in indulgence, and having nothing to do. Many things therefore our mind is in haste to learn already and to comprehend, but especially concerning the period of the consummation; and what wonder if we are thus affected, for those holy men, themselves, were most of all affected in the same way? And before the Passion, the Apostles come and say to Christ, Tell us, when shall these things be, and what shall be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the world? Matthew 24:23 And after the Passion and the Resurrection from the dead, they said to Him, Tell us, dost Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? From Acts 1:6 And they asked Him nothing sooner than this.

But it was not so afterwards, when they had been vouchsafed the Holy Ghost. Not only do they not themselves inquire, nor complain of this ignorance, but they repress those who labor under this unseasonable curiosity. Hear for instance what the blessed Paul now says, But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that anything be written unto you. Why has he not said that no

one knows? Why has he not said, that it is not revealed, instead of saying, You have no need that anything be written unto you? Because in that case he would have grieved them more, but by speaking thus he comforted them. For by the expression, You have no need, as if it were both superfluous, and inexpedient, he suffers them not to enquire.

For tell me, what would be the advantage? Let us suppose that the end would be after twenty or thirty or a hundred years, what is this to us? Is not the end of his own life the consummation to every individual? Why are you curious, and travailest about the general end? But the case is the same with us in this, as in other things. For as in other things, leaving our own private concerns, we are anxious about things in general, saying, Such an one is a fornicator, such an one an adulterer, that man has robbed, another has been injurious; but no one takes account of what is his own, but each thinks of anything rather than his own private concerns; so here also, each omitting to take thought about his own end, we are anxious to hear about the general dissolution. Now what concern is that of yours? For if you make your own a good end, you will suffer no harm from the other; be it far off, or be it near. This is nothing to us.

For this reason Christ did not tell it, because it was not expedient. How, you say, was it not expedient? He who also concealed it knows wherefore it was not expedient. For hear Him saying to His Apostles, It is not for you to know times, or seasons, which the Father has set within His own authority. Acts 1:7 Why are you curious? Peter, the chief of the Apostles, and his fellows, heard this said, as if they were seeking things too great for them to know. True, you say; but it were possible to stop the mouths of the Greeks in this way. How? Tell me. Because they say, that this world is a god; if we knew the period of its dissolution, we should have stopped their mouths. Why, is this what will stop their mouths, to know when it will be destroyed, or to know that it will be destroyed? Tell them this, that it will have an end. If they do not believe this, neither will they believe the other.

Hear Paul saying, For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. Not the general day only, but that of every individual. For the one resembles the other, is also akin to it. For what the one does collectively, that the other does partially. For the period of consummation took its beginning from Adam, and then is the end of the consummation; since even now one would not err in calling it a consummation. For when ten thousand die every day, and all await That Day, and no one is raised before it, is it not the work of That Day? And if you would know on what account it is concealed, and why it so comes as a thief in the night, I will tell you how I think I can well account for it. No one would have ever cultivated virtue during his whole life; but knowing his last day, and, after having committed numberless sins, then having come to the Laver, he would so have departed. For if now, when the fear arising from its uncertainty shakes the souls of all, still all, having spent their whole former life in wickedness, at their last breath give themselves up to Baptism, -- if they had fully persuaded themselves concerning this matter, who would ever have cultivated virtue? If many have departed without Illumination, and not even this fear has taught them, while living, to cultivate the things that are pleasing to God; if this fear also had been removed, who would ever have been sober, or who gentle? There is not one! And another thing again. The fear of death and the love of life restrain many. But if each one knew that tomorrow he would certainly die, there is nothing he would refuse to attempt before that day, but he would murder whomsoever he wished, and would retrieve himself by taking vengeance on his enemies, and would perpetrate ten thousand crimes.

For a wicked man, who despairs of his life here, pays no regard even to him who is invested with the purple. He therefore who was persuaded that he must at all events die would both be revenged upon his enemy, and after having first satisfied his own soul, so would meet his end. Let me mention also a third

thing. Those who are fond of life, and vehemently attached to the things of this world, would be ruined by despair and grief. For if any of the young knew that before he reached old age, he should meet his end, as the most sluggish of wild beasts, when they are taken, become still more sluggish from expecting their end, so would he also be affected. Besides, not even the men that are courageous would have had their reward. For if they knew that after three years they must certainly die, and before that time it was not possible, what reward would they have gained for daring in the face of dangers? For any one might say to them, Because you are confident of the three years of life, for this reason you throw yourselves into dangers, knowing that it is not possible for you to pass away. For he, that expects from each danger that he may come by his death, and knows that he shall live indeed, if he does not expose himself to peril, but shall die if he attempts such and such actions, he gives the greatest proof of his zeal, and of his contempt for the present life. And this I will make plain to you by an example. Tell me, if the patriarch Abraham, foreknowing that he should not have to sacrifice his son, had brought him to the place, would he then have had any reward? And what if Paul, foreknowing that he should not die, had despised dangers, in what respect would he have been admirable? For so even the most sluggish would rush into the fire, if he could find any one he could trust to ensure his safety. But not such were the Three Children. For hear them saying, O king, there is a God in heaven, who will deliver us out of your hands, and out of this furnace; and if not, be it known to you that we do not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image which you have set up. Daniel 3:17, Septuagint

You see how many advantages there are, and yet there are more than these that arise from not knowing the time of our end. Meanwhile it is sufficient to learn these. On this account He so comes as a thief in the night; that we may not abandon ourselves to wickedness, nor to sloth; that He may not take from us our reward. For yourselves know perfectly, he says. Why then are you curious, if you are persuaded? But that the future is uncertain, learn from what Christ has said. For that on this account He said it, hear what he says, Watch therefore: for you know not at what hour the thief comes. Matthew 24:42 On this account also Paul said,

Ver. 3. When they are saying peace and safety, then sudden destruction comes upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall in nowise escape.

Here he has glanced at something which he has also said in his second Epistle. For since they indeed were in affliction, but they that warred on them at ease and in luxury, and then while he comforted them in their present sufferings by this mention of the Resurrection, the others insulted them with arguments taken from their forefathers, and said, When will it happen?-- which the Prophets also said, Woe unto them that say, Let him make speed, let God hasten his work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel come, that we may know it! Isaiah 5:19; and again Woe unto them that desire the day of the Lord. Amos 5:18 He means this day; for he does not speak simply of persons who desire it, but of those who desire it because they disbelieve it: and the day of the Lord, he says, is darkness, and not light -- see then how Paul consoles them, as if he had said, Let them not account their being in a prosperous state, a proof that the Judgment is not coming. For so it is that it will come.

But it may be worth while to ask, If Antichrist comes, and Elias comes, how is it when they say Peace and safety, that then a sudden destruction comes upon them? For these things do not permit the day to come upon them unawares, being signs of its coming. But he does not mean this to be the time of Antichrist, and the whole day, because that will be a sign of the coming of Christ, but Himself will not have a sign, but will come suddenly and unexpectedly. For travail, indeed, you say, does not come upon the pregnant woman unexpectedly: for she knows that after nine months the birth will take place. And yet it is very uncertain.

For some bring forth at the seventh month, and others at the ninth. And at any rate the day and the hour is uncertain. With respect to this therefore, Paul speaks thus. And the image is exact. For there are not many sure signs of travail; many indeed have brought forth in the high roads, or when out of their houses and abroad, not foreseeing it. And he has not only glanced here at the uncertainty, but also at the bitterness of the pain. For as she while sporting, laughing, not looking for anything at all, being suddenly seized with unspeakable pains, is pierced through with the pangs of labor -- so will it be with those souls, when the Day comes upon them.

And they shall in nowise escape. As he was saying just now.

Ver. 4. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.

Here he speaks of a life that is dark and impure. For it is just as corrupt and wicked men do all things as in the night, escaping the notice of all, and inclosing themselves in darkness. For tell me, does not the adulterer watch for the evening, and the thief for the night? Does not the violator of the tombs carry on all his trade in the night? What then? Does it not overtake them as a thief? Does it not come upon them also uncertainly, but do they know it beforehand? How then does he say, You have no need that anything be written unto you? He speaks here not with respect to the uncertainty, but with respect to the calamity, that is, it will not come as an evil to them. For it will come uncertainly indeed even to them, but it will involve them in no trouble. That that Day, he says, may not overtake you as a thief. For in the case of those who are watching and who are in the light, if there should be any entry of a robber, it can do them no harm: so also it is with those who live well. But those who are sleeping he will strip of everything, and go off; that is, those who are trusting in the things of this life.

Ver. 5. For you are all, he says, sons of light, and sons of the day.

And how is it possible to be sons of the day? Just as it is said, sons of destruction and sons of hell. Wherefore Christ also said to the Pharisees, Woe unto you -- for you compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he has become so, you make him a son of hell. Matthew 23:15 And again Paul said, For which things' sake comes the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience. Colossians 3:6 That is, those who do the works of hell and the works of disobedience. So also sons of God are those who do things pleasing to God; so also sons of day and sons of light, those who do the works of light. And we are not of the night nor of darkness.

Ver. 6, 7, 8. So then let us not sleep, as do also the rest, but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, since we are of the day, be sober.

Here he shows, that to be in the day depends on ourselves. For here indeed, in the case of the present day and night, it does not depend on ourselves. But night comes even against our will, and sleep overtakes us when we do not wish it. But with respect to that night and that sleep, it is not so, but it is in our power always to have it day, it is in our power always to watch. For to shut the eyes of the soul, and to bring on the sleep of wickedness, is not of nature, but of our own choice. But let us watch, he says, and be sober. For it is possible to sleep while awake, by doing nothing good. Wherefore he has added, and be sober. For even by day, if any one watches, but is not sober, he will fall into numberless dangers, so that sobriety is the intensity of watchfulness. They that sleep, he says, sleep in the night, and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. The drunkenness he here speaks of is not that from wine only, but that also which comes of all vices. For riches and the desire of wealth is a drunkenness of the soul, and so

carnal lust; and every sin you can name is a drunkenness of the soul. On what account then has he called vice sleep? Because in the first place the vicious man is inactive with respect to virtue: again, because he sees everything as a vision, he views nothing in its true light, but is full of dreams, and oftentimes of unreasonable actions: and if he sees anything good, he has no firmness, no fixedness. Such is the present life. It is full of dreams, and of phantasy. Riches are a dream, and glory, and everything of that sort. He who sleeps sees not things that are and have a real subsistence, but things that are not he fancies as things that are. Such is vice, and the life that is passed in vice. It sees not things that are, that is, spiritual, heavenly, abiding things, but things that are fleeting and fly away, and that soon recede from us.

But it is not sufficient to watch and be sober, we must also be armed. For if a man watch and is sober, but has not arms, the robbers soon dispatch him. When therefore we ought both to watch, and to be sober, and to be armed, and we are unarmed and naked and asleep, who will hinder him from thrusting home his sword? Wherefore showing this also, that we have need of arms, he has added:

Ver. 8. Putting on the breastplate of faith and love: and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

Of faith and love, he says. Here he glances at life and doctrine. He has shown what it is to watch and be sober, to have the breastplate of faith and love. Not a common faith, he says, but as nothing can soon pierce through a breastplate, but it is a safe wall to the breast -- so do thou also, he says, surround your soul with faith and love, and none of the fiery darts of the devil can ever be fixed in it. For where the power of the soul is preoccupied with the armor of love, all the devices of those who plot against it are vain and ineffectual. For neither wickedness, nor hatred, nor envy, nor flattery, nor hypocrisy, nor any other thing will be able to penetrate such a soul. He has not simply said love, but he has bid them put it on as a strong breastplate. And for a helmet the hope of salvation. For as the helmet guards the vital part in us, surrounding the head and covering it on every side, so also this hope does not suffer the reason to falter, but sets it upright as the head, not permitting anything from without to fall upon it. And while nothing falls on it, neither does it slip of itself. For it is not possible that one who is fortified with such arms as these, should ever fall. For now abides faith, hope, love. 1 Corinthians 13:13 Then having said, Put on, and array yourselves, he himself provides the armor, whence faith, hope, and love may be produced, and may become strong.

Ver. 9. For God appointed us not unto wrath, but unto the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us.

Thus God has not inclined to this, that He might destroy us, but that He might save us. And whence is it manifest that this is His will? He has given His own Son for us. So does He desire that we should be saved, that He has given His Son, and not merely given, but given Him to death. From these considerations hope is produced. For do not despair of yourself, O man, in going to God, who has not spared even His Son for you. Faint not at present evils. He who gave His Only-Begotten, that He might save you and deliver you from hell, what will He spare henceforth for your salvation? So that you ought to hope for all things kind. For neither should we fear, if we were going to a judge who was about to judge us, and who had shown so much love for us, as to have sacrificed his son. Let us hope therefore for kind and great things, for we have received the principal thing; let us believe, for we have seen an example; let us love, for it is the extreme of madness for one not to love who has been so treated.

Ver. 10, 11. That, whether we wake or sleep, he says, we should live together with Him. Wherefore exhort one another, and build each other up, even as also you do.

And again, whether we wake or sleep; by sleep there he means one thing, and here another. For here, whether we sleep signifies the death of the body; that is, fear not dangers; though we should die, we shall live. Do not despair because you are in danger. You have a strong security. He would not have given His Son if He had not been inflamed by vehement love for us. So that, though you should die, you will live; for He Himself also died. Therefore whether we die, or whether we live, we shall live with Him. This is a matter of indifference: it is no concern of mine, whether I live or die; for we shall live with Him. Let us therefore do everything for that life: looking to that, let us do all our works. Vice, O beloved, is darkness, it is death, it is night; we see nothing that we ought, we do nothing that becomes us. As the dead are unsightly and of evil odor, so also the souls of those who are vicious are full of much impurity. Their eyes are closed, their mouth is stopped, they remain without motion in the bed of vice; or rather more wretched than those who are naturally dead. For they truly are dead to both, but these are insensible indeed to virtue, but alive to vice. If one should strike a dead man, he perceives it not, he revenges it not, but is like a dry stick. So also his soul is truly dry, having lost its life; it receives daily numberless wounds, and has no feeling of any, but lies insensible to everything.

One would not err in comparing such men to those who are mad, or drunk, or delirious. All these things belong to vice, and it is worse than all these. He that is mad is much allowed for by those who see him, for his disease is not from choice, but from nature alone; but how shall he be pardoned, who lives in vice? Whence then is vice? Whence are the majority bad? Tell me, whence have diseases their evil nature? Whence is frenzy? Whence is lethargy? Is it not from carelessness?

If physical disorders have their origin in choice, much more those which are voluntary. Whence is drunkenness? Is it not from intemperance of soul? Is not frenzy from excess of fever? And is not fever from the elements too abundant in us? And is not this superabundance of elements from our carelessness? For when either from deficiency or excess we carry any of the things within us beyond the bounds of moderation, we kindle that fire. Again, if when the fire is kindled, we continue to neglect it, we make a conflagration for ourselves, which we are not able to extinguish.

So is it also with vice. When we do not restrain it at its beginning, nor cut it off, we cannot afterwards reach to the end of it, but it becomes too great for our power. Wherefore, I beseech you, let us do everything that we may never become drowsy. Do you not see that when sentinels have only given way a little to sleep, they derive no advantage from their long watch, for by that little they have ruined the whole, having given perfect security to him who is prepared to steal.

For as we do not see thieves in the same way that they see us, so also the devil most of all is ever instant, and lying in wait, and grinding his teeth. Let us not then slumber. Let us not say, on this side there is nothing, on that side nothing; we are often plundered from a quarter whence we did not expect it. So it is with vice; we perish from a quarter whence we did not expect it. Let us look carefully round upon all things, let us not be drunken, and we shall not sleep.

Let us not be luxurious, and we shall not slumber. Let us not be mad for external things, and we shall continue in sobriety. Let us discipline ourselves on every side. And as men who walk upon a tight rope cannot be off their guard ever so little, for that little causes great mischief: for the man losing his balance is at once precipitated down and perishes; so neither is it possible for us to be off our guard. We walk upon a

narrow road intercepted by precipices on either side, not admitting of two feet at the same time.

Do you see not how much carefulness is necessary? Do you see not how those who travel on such roads guard not only their feet, but their eyes also? For if he should choose to gaze on one side, though his foot stand firm, his eye becoming dizzy from the depth, plunges the whole body down. But he must take heed to himself and to his steps; wherefore he says, neither to the right hand, nor to the left. Proverbs 4:27 Great is the depth of vice, high the precipices, much darkness below.

Let us take heed to the narrow way, let us walk with fear and trembling. No one, who is traveling such a road, is dissolved in laughter nor heavy with drunkenness, but travels such a road with sobriety and fasting. No one traveling such a road carries with him any superfluities; for he would be contented even lightly equipped to be able to escape. No one entangles his own feet, but leaves them disengaged, and free to move.

But we, chaining ourselves down with numberless cares, and carrying with us the numberless burdens of this life, staring about, and loosely rambling, how do we expect to travel in that narrow road? He has not merely said that narrow is the way Matthew 7:14, but with wonder, how narrow is the way, that is, exceedingly narrow. And this we also do in things that are quite objects of wonder. And straitened, he says, is the way which leads unto life. And he has well said it. For when we are bound to give an account of our thoughts, and words, and actions, and all things, truly it is narrow. But we ourselves make it more narrow, spreading out and widening ourselves, and shuffling out our feet. For the narrow way is difficult to every one, but especially to him who is incumbered with fat, as he who makes himself lean will not perceive its narrowness. So that he who has practiced himself in being pinched, will not be discouraged at its pressure.

Let not any one therefore expect that he shall see heaven with ease. For it cannot be. Let no one hope to travel the narrow road with luxury, for it is impossible. Let no one traveling in the broad way hope for life. When therefore you see such and such an one luxuriating in baths, in a sumptuous table, or in other matters having troops of attendants; think not yourself unhappy, as not partaking of these things, but lament for him, that he is traveling the way to destruction. For what is the advantage of this way, when it ends in tribulation? And what is the injury of that straitness, when it leads to rest? Tell me, if any one invited to a palace should walk through narrow ways painful and precipitous, and another led to death should be dragged through the midst of the market-place, which shall we call happy? Which shall we commiserate? Him, shall we not, who walks through the broad road? So also now, let us think happy, not those who are luxurious, but those who are not luxurious. These are hastening to heaven, those to hell.

And perhaps indeed many of them will even laugh at the things that are said by us. But I most of all lament and bewail them on this account, that they do not even know what they ought to laugh at, and for what they ought especially to mourn, but they confound and disturb and disorder everything. On this account I bewail them. What do you say, O man, when you are to rise again, and to give an account of your actions, and to undergo the last sentence, do you pay no regard indeed to these, but give thought to gratifying your belly, and being drunken?

And do you laugh at these things? But I bewail you, knowing the evils that await you, the punishment that is about to overtake you. And this I most especially bewail, that you dost laugh! Mourn with me, bewail with me your own evils. Tell me, if one of your friends perishes, do you not turn from those who laugh at his end, and think them enemies, but love those who weep and sympathize with you? Then indeed if the

dead body of your wife were laid out, you turn from him that laughs: but when your soul is done to death, do you turn from him that weeps, and laugh yourself?

Do you see how the devil has disposed us to be enemies and adversaries to ourselves? For once let us be sober, let us open our eyes, let us watch, let us lay hold on eternal life, let us shake off this long sleep. There is a Judgment, there is a Punishment, there is a Resurrection, there is an Inquisition into what we have done! The Lord comes in the clouds Before Him, he says, a fire will be kindled, and round about Him a mighty tempest Psalm 50:3, Septuagint A river of fire rolls before him, the undying worm, unquenchable fire, outer darkness, gnashing of teeth.

Although you should be angry with me ten thousand times for mentioning these things, I shall not cease from mentioning them. For if the prophets, though stoned, did not keep silence, much more ought we to bear with enmities, and not to discourse to you with a view to please, that we may not, for having deceived you, be ourselves cut in sunder. There is punishment, deathless, unallayed, and no one to stand up for us. Who will pity, he says, the charmer that is bitten by a serpent?

Sirach 12:13 When we pity not our own selves, tell me, who will pity us? If you see a man piercing himself with a sword, will you be able to spare his life? By no means. Much more, when having it in our power to do well we do not do well, who will spare us? No one! Let us pity ourselves. When we pray to God, saying, Lord, have mercy upon me, let us say it to ourselves, and have mercy upon ourselves. We are the arbiters of God's having mercy upon us. This grace He has bestowed upon us.

If we do things worthy of mercy, worthy of His loving-kindness towards us, God will have mercy upon us. But if we have not mercy on ourselves, who will spare us? Have mercy on your neighbor, and you shall find mercy of God Himself. How many every day come to you, saying, Have pity on me, and thou dost not turn towards them; how many naked, how many maimed, and we do not bend toward them, but dismiss their supplications. How then do you claim to obtain mercy, when you yourself dost nothing worthy of mercy?

Let us become compassionate, let us become pitiful, that so we may be well-pleasing to God, and obtain the good things promised to those that love Him, by the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom, etc.

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