

2 Corinthians 12:1

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:1 emphasizes the importance of humility and the transformative power of God's grace in our weaknesses and sufferings.

Scripture: 1 Kings 5:4, Psalm 139:23, Luke 23:43, John 16:33, 2 Corinthians 1:5, 2 Corinthians 12:2, 2 Corinthians 12:7, 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Topics: "Humility And Pride", "Gods Grace"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of humility and the dangers of pride, using the example of Paul's revelations and thorn in the flesh to illustrate the need to avoid boasting and to rely on God's grace in times of weakness. Paul's experiences of visions and revelations, including being caught up to the third heaven, highlight the mysteries of God's work beyond human understanding. Chrysostom emphasizes the strength found in weakness, as seen in Paul's willingness to endure persecutions, distresses, and hardships for the sake of Christ, ultimately leading to a deeper reliance on God's power and grace.

Transcript

It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory, [for] I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.

What is this? Does he who has spoken such great things say, [It is not expedient] doubtless to glory? as if he had said nothing? No; not as if he had said nothing: but because he is going to pass to another species of boasting, which is not intended indeed by so great a reward, but which to the many (though not to careful examiners) seems to set him off in brighter colors, he says, It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. For truly the great grounds of boasting were those which he had recounted, those of his trials; he has however other things also to tell of, such as concern the revelations, the unspeakable mysteries. And wherefore, says he, It is not expedient for me? he means, 'lest it lift me up to pride.' What do you say? For if you speak not of them, yet do you not know of them? But our knowing of them ourselves does not lift us up so much as our publishing them to others. For it is not the nature of good deeds that uses to lift a man up, but their being witnessed to, and known of, by the many. For this cause therefore he says, It is not expedient for me; and, 'that I may not implant too great an idea of me in those who hear.' For those men indeed, the false apostles, said even what was not true about themselves; but this man hides even what is true, and that too although so great necessity lies upon him, and says, It is not expedient for me; teaching one and all even to superfluity to avoid any thing of the sort. For this thing is attended with no advantage,

but even with harm, except there be some necessary and useful reason which induces us thereto. Having then spoken of his perils, trials, snares, dejections, shipwrecks, he passes to another species of boasting, saying,

2 Corinthians 12:2-5

I knew a man, fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I know not; or out of the body, I know not: God knows;) such an one caught up even to the third heaven. And I know how that he was caught up into Paradise, (whether in the body, I know not; or out of the body, I know not;) and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. On behalf of such an one will I glory: but on my own behalf I will not glory.

Great indeed was this revelation. But this was not the only one: there were many others besides, but he mentions one out of many. For that there were many, hear what he says: Lest I should be exalted overmuch through the exceeding greatness of the revelations. 'And yet,' a man may say, 'if he wished to conceal them, he ought not to have given any intimation whatever or said any thing of the sort; but if he wished to speak of them, to speak plainly.' Wherefore then is it that he neither spoke plainly nor kept silence?

To show by this also that he resorts to the thing unwillingly. And therefore also he has stated the time, fourteen years. For he does not mention it without an object, but to show that he who had refrained for so long a time would not now have spoken out, except the necessity for doing so had been great. But he would have still kept silence, had he not seen the brethren perishing. Now if Paul from the very beginning was such an one as to be counted worthy of such a revelation, when as yet he had not wrought such good works; consider what he must have grown to in fourteen years.

And observe how even in this very matter he shows modesty, by his saying some things, but confessing that of others he is ignorant. For that he was caught up indeed, he declared, but whether in the body or out of the body he says he does not know. And yet it would have been quite enough, if he had told of his being caught up and had been silent [about the other]; but as it is, in his modesty he adds this also. What then? Was it the mind that was caught up and the soul, while the body remained dead?

Or was the body caught up? It is impossible to tell. For if Paul who was caught up and whom things unspeakable, so many and so great, had befallen was in ignorance, much more we. For, indeed, that he was in Paradise he knew, and that he was in the third heaven he was not ignorant, but the manner he knew not clearly. And see from yet another consideration how free he is from pride. For in his narrative about the city of the Damascenes 2 Corinthians 11:32 he confirms what he says, but here not; for it was not his aim to establish this fact strongly, but to mention and intimate it only.

Wherefore also he goes on to say, Of such an one will I glory; not meaning that he who was caught up was some other person, but he so frames his language in the best manner he possibly could, so as at once to mention the fact, and to avoid speaking of himself openly. For what sequence would there be in bringing some one else forward, when discoursing about himself? Wherefore then did he so put it? It was not all one to say, 'I was caught up,' and, I knew one that was caught up; and 'I will glory of myself,' and, I will glory of such an one.

Now if any should say, 'And how is it possible to be caught up without a body?' I will ask him, 'How is it possible to be caught up with a body?' for this is even more inexplicable than the other, if you examine by

reasonings and do not give place to faith.

2. But wherefore was he also caught up? As I think, that he might not seem to be inferior to the rest of the Apostles. For since they had companied with Christ, but Paul had not: He therefore caught up unto glory him also. Into Paradise. For great was the name of this place, and it was everywhere celebrated. Wherefore also Christ said, Today you shall be with Me in Paradise. Luke 23:43

On behalf of such an one will I glory? wherefore? For if another were caught up, wherefore do you glory? Whence it is evident that he said these things of himself. And if he added, but of myself I will not glory, he says nothing else than this, that, 'when there is no necessity, I will say nothing of that kind fruitlessly and at random;' or else he is again throwing obscurity over what he had said, as best he might. For that the whole discourse was about himself, what follows also clearly shows; for he went on to say,

2 Corinthians 12:6

But if I should even desire to glory, I shall not be foolish; for I shall speak the truth.

How then did you say before, Would that you could bear with me a little in my foolishness; 2 Corinthians 11:1 and, That which I speak, I speak not after the Lord, but as it were foolishly; 2 Corinthians 11:17 but here, Though I should even desire to glory, I shall not be foolish? Not in regard of glorying, but of lying; for if glorying be foolishness, how much more lying?

It is then with regard to this that he says, I shall not be foolish. Wherefore also he added,

For I shall speak the truth; but I forbear, lest any man should account of me above that which he sees, or that he hears from me. Here you have the acknowledged reason; for they even deemed them to be gods, on account of the greatness of their miracles. As then in the case of the elements, God has done both things, creating them at once weak and glorious; the one, to proclaim His own power; the other, to prevent the error of mankind: so truly here also were they both wonderful and weak, so that by the facts themselves were the unbelievers instructed. For if while continuing to be wonderful only and giving no proof of weakness, they had by words tried to draw away the many from conceiving of them more than the truth; not only would they have nothing succeeded, but they would even have brought about the contrary. For those dissuasions in words would have seemed rather to spring of lowliness of mind, and would have caused them to be the more admired. Therefore in act and by deeds was their weakness disclosed. And one may see this exemplified in the men who lived under the old dispensation. For Elias was wonderful, but on one occasion he stood convicted of faint-heartedness; and Moses was great, but he also fled under the influence of the same passion. Now such things befell them, because God stood aloof and permitted their human nature to stand confessed. For if because he led them out they said, 'Where is Moses?' what would they not have said, if he had also led them in? Wherefore also [Paul] himself says, I forbear, lest any should account of me. He said not, 'say of me,' but, lest any should even account of me beyond my desert.' Whence it is evident from this also that the whole discourse relates to himself. Wherefore even when he began, he said, It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory, which he would not have said, had he been going to speak the things which he said of another man. For wherefore is it not expedient to glory about another? But it was himself that was counted worthy of these things; and therefore it is that he goes on to say,

2 Corinthians 12:7

And that I should not be exalted overmuch, through the exceeding greatness of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to buffet me.

What do you say? He that counted not the kingdom to be any thing; no, nor yet hell in respect of his longing after Christ; did he deem honor from the many to be any thing, so as both to be lifted up and to need that curb continually? For he did not say, 'that he might buffet me,' but that he may buffet me. Yet who is there would say this? What then is the meaning of what is said? When we have explained what is meant at all by the thorn, and who is this messenger of Satan, then will we declare this also. There are some then who have said that he means a kind of pain in the head which was inflicted of the devil; but God forbid! For the body of Paul never could have been given over to the hands of the devil, seeing that the devil himself submitted to the same Paul at his mere bidding; and he set him laws and bounds, when he delivered over the fornicator for the destruction of the flesh, and he dared not to transgress them. What then is the meaning of what is said? An adversary is called, in the Hebrew, Satan; and in the third Book of Kings the Scripture has so termed such as were adversaries; and speaking of Solomon, says, 'In his days there was no Satan,' that is, no adversary, enemy, or opponent. 1 Kings 5:4 What he says then is this: God would not permit the Preaching to progress, in order to check our high thoughts; but permitted the adversaries to set upon us. For this indeed was enough to pluck down his high thoughts; not so that, pains in the head. And so by the messenger of Satan, he means Alexander the coppersmith, the party of Hymenæus and Philetus, all the adversaries of the word; those who contended with and fought against him, those that cast him into a prison, those that beat him, that led him away to death ; for they did Satan's business. As then he calls those Jews children of the devil, who were imitating his deeds, so also he calls a messenger of Satan every one that opposes. He says therefore, There was given to me a thorn to buffet me; not as if God puts arms into such men's hands, God forbid! not that He does chastise or punish, but for the time allows and permits them.

2 Corinthians 12:8

3. Concerning this thing I besought the Lord thrice.

That is, oftentimes. This also is a mark of great lowliness of mind, his not concealing that he could not bear those insidious plottings, that he fainted under them and was reduced to pray for deliverance.

2 Corinthians 12:9

And He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in weakness.

That is to say, 'It is sufficient for you that you raise the dead, that you cure the blind, that you cleanse lepers, that you work those other miracles; seek not also exemption from danger and fear and to preach without annoyances. But are you pained and dejected lest it should seem to be owing to My weakness, that there are many who plot against and beat you and harass and scourge you? Why this very thing does show My power. For My power, He says, is made perfect in weakness, when being persecuted ye overcome your persecutors; when being harassed ye get the better of them that harass you; when being put in bonds ye convert them that put you in bonds. Seek not then more than is needed.' Do you see how he himself assigns one reason, and God another? For he himself says, Lest I should be exalted overmuch, there was given to me a thorn; but he says that God said He permitted it in order to show His power. 'You seek therefore a thing which is not only not needed, but which also obscures the glory of My power.' For by the words, is sufficient for you, He would signify this, that nothing else need be added, but the whole was complete. So that from this also it is plain that he does not intend pains in the head; for in

truth they did not preach when they were sick, for they could not preach when ill; but that harassed and persecuted, they overcame all. 'After having heard this then,' he says,

Most gladly therefore will I glory in my weaknesses. For that they may not sink down, when those false Apostles are glorying over their contrary lot and these are suffering persecution, he shows that he shines all the brighter for this, and that thus the power of God shines forth the rather, and what happens is just matter for glorying. Wherefore he says, Most gladly therefore will I glory. 'Not as therefore sorrowing did I speak of the things which I enumerated, or of that which I have just now said, there was given to me a thorn; but as priding myself upon them and drawing to myself greater power.' Wherefore also he adds,

That the strength of Christ may rest upon me. Here he hints at another thing also, namely, that in proportion as the trials waxed in intensity, in the same proportion the grace was increased and continued.

2 Corinthians 12:10

Wherefore I take pleasure in many weaknesses. Of what sort? Tell me. In injuries, in persecutions, in necessities, in distresses.

Do you see how he has now revealed it in the clearest manner? For in mentioning the species of the infirmity he spoke not of fevers, nor any return of that sort, nor any other bodily ailment, but of injuries, persecutions, distresses. Do you see a single-minded soul? He longs to be delivered from those dangers; but when he heard God's answer that this befits not, he was not only not sorry that he was disappointed of his prayer, but was even glad. Wherefore he said, I take pleasure, 'I rejoice, I long, to be injured, persecuted, distressed for Christ's sake.' And he said these things both to check those, and to raise the spirits of these that they might not be ashamed at Paul's sufferings. For that ground was enough to make them shine brighter than all men. Then he mentions another reason also.

For when I am weak, then am I strong. 'Why do you marvel that the power of God is then conspicuous? I too am strong then;' for then most of all did grace come upon him. For as His sufferings abound, so does our consolation abound also. 2 Corinthians 1:5

4. Where affliction is, there is also consolation; where consolation, there is grace also. For instance when he was thrown into the prison, then it was he wrought those marvellous things; when he was shipwrecked and cast away upon that barbarous country, then more than ever was he glorified. When he went bound into the judgment-hall, then he overcame even the judge. And so it was too in the Old Testament; by their trials the righteous flourished. So it was with the three children, so with Daniel, with Moses, and Joseph; thence did they all shine and were counted worthy of great crowns. For then the soul also is purified, when it is afflicted for God's sake: it then enjoys greater assistance as needing more help and worthy of more grace. And truly, before the reward which is proposed to it by God, it reaps a rich harvest of good things by becoming philosophic. For affliction rends pride away and prunes out all listlessness and exercises unto patience: it reveals the meanness of human things and leads unto much philosophy. For all the passions give way before it, envy, emulation, lust, rule, desire of riches, of beauty, boastfulness, pride, anger; and the whole remaining swarm of these distempers. And if you desire to see this in actual working, I shall be able to show you both a single individual and a whole people, as well under affliction as at ease; and so to teach you how great advantage comes of the one, and how great listlessness from the other.

For the people of the Hebrews, when they were vexed and persecuted, groaned and besought God, and drew down upon themselves great influences from above: but when they waxed fat, they kicked. The

Ninevities again, when they were in the enjoyment of security, so exasperated God that He threatened to pluck up the entire city from its foundations: but after they had been humbled by that preaching, they displayed all virtue. But if you would see also a single individual, consider Solomon.

For he, when deliberating with anxiety and trouble concerning the government of that nation, was vouchsafed that vision: but when he was in the enjoyment of luxury, he slid into the very pit of iniquity. And what did his father? When was he admirable and passing belief? Was it not when he was in trials? And Absalom, was he not sober-minded, while still an exile; but after his return, became both tyrannical and a parricide? And what did Job? He indeed shone even in prosperity, but showed yet brighter after his affliction.

And why must one speak of the old and ancient things? For if one do but examine our own state at present, he will see how great is the advantage of affliction. For now indeed that we are in the enjoyment of peace, we have become supine, and lax and have filled the Church with countless evils; but when we were persecuted, we were more sober-minded, and kinder, and more earnest, and more ready as to these assemblies and as to hearing. For what fire is to gold, that is affliction unto souls; wiping away filth, rendering men clean, making them bright and shining.

It leads unto the kingdom, that unto hell. And therefore the one way is broad, the other narrow. Wherefore also, He Himself said, In the world you shall have tribulation, John 16:33 as though he were leaving some great good behind unto us. If then you are a disciple, travel thou the straight and narrow way, and be not disgusted nor discouraged. For even if you be not afflicted in that way; you must inevitably be afflicted on other grounds, of no advantage to you. For the envious man also, and the lover of money, and he that burns for an harlot, and the vainglorious, and each one of the rest that follow whatsoever is evil, endures many disheartenings and afflictions, and is not less afflicted than they who mourn.

And if he does not weep nor mourn, it is for shame and insensibility: since if you should look into his soul, you will see it filled with countless waves. Since then whether we follow this way of life or that, we must needs be afflicted: wherefore choose we not this way which along with affliction brings crowns innumerable? For thus has God led all the saints through affliction and distress, at once doing them service, and securing the rest of men against entertaining a higher opinion of them than they deserve.

For thus it was that idolatries gained ground at first; men being held in admiration beyond their desert. Thus the Roman senate decreed Alexander to be the thirteenth God, for it possessed the privilege of electing and enrolling Gods. For instance, when all about Christ had been reported, the ruler of the nation sent to inquire, whether they would be pleased to elect Him also a God. They however refused their consent, being angry and indignant that previous to their vote and decree, the Power of the Crucified flashing abroad had won over the whole world to its own worship.

But thus it was ordered even against their will that the Divinity of Christ was not proclaimed by man's decree, nor was He counted one of the many that were by them elected. For they counted even boxers to be Gods, and the favorite of Hadrian; after whom the city Antinous is named. For since death testifies against their moral nature, the devil invented another way, that of the soul's immortality; and mingling therewith that excessive flattery, he seduced many into impiety. And observe what wicked artifice.

When we advance that doctrine for a good purpose, he overthrows our words; but when he himself is desirous of framing an argument for mischief, he is very zealous in setting it up. And if any one ask, 'How is Alexander a God? Is he not dead? And miserably too?' 'Yes, but the soul is immortal?' he replies. Now

you argue and philosophize for immortality, to detach men from the God Who is over all: but when we declare that this is God's greatest gift, you persuade your dupes that men are low and grovelling, and in no better case than the brutes.

And if we say, 'the Crucified lives,' laughter follows immediately: although the whole world proclaims it, both in old time and now; in old time by miracles, now by converts; for truly these successes are not those of a dead man: but if one say, 'Alexander lives,' you believe, although you have no miracle to allege.

5. 'Yes,' one replies; 'I have; for when he lived he wrought many and great achievements; for he subdued both nations and cities, and in many wars and battles he conquered, and erected trophies.'

If then I shall show [somewhat] which he when alive never dreamed of, neither he, nor any other man that ever lived, what other proof of the resurrection will you require? For that while alive one should win battles and victories, being a king and having armies at his disposal, is nothing marvelous, no, nor startling or novel; but that after a Cross and Tomb one should perform such great things throughout every land and sea, this it is which is most especially replete with such amazement, and proclaims His divine and unutterable Power.

And Alexander indeed after his decease never restored again his kingdom which had been rent in pieces and quite abolished: indeed how was it likely he, dead, should do so? But Christ then most of all set up His after He was dead. And why speak I of Christ? Seeing that He granted to His disciples also, after their deaths, to shine? For, tell me, where is the tomb of Alexander? Show it me and tell me the day on which he died. But of the servants of Christ the very tombs are glorious, seeing they have taken possession of the most loyal city; and their days are well known, making festivals for the world.

And his tomb even his own people know not, but this man's the very barbarians know. And the tombs of the servants of the Crucified are more splendid than the palaces of kings; not for the size and beauty of the buildings, (yet even in this they surpass them,) but, what is far more, in the zeal of those who frequent them. For he that wears the purple himself goes to embrace those tombs, and, laying aside his pride, stands begging the saints to be his advocates with God, and he that has the diadem implores the tent-maker and the fisherman, though dead, to be his patrons.

Will you dare then, tell me, to call the Lord of these dead; whose servants even after their decease are the patrons of the kings of the world? And this one may see take place not in Rome only, but in Constantinople also. For there also Constantine the Great, his son considered he should be honoring with great honor, if he buried him in the porch of the fisherman; and what porters are to kings in their palaces, that kings are at the tomb to fisherman. And these indeed as lords of the place occupy the inside, while the others as though but sojourners and neighbors were glad to have the gate of the porch assigned them; showing by what is done in this world, even to the unbelievers, that in the Resurrection the fisherman will be yet more their superiors.

For if here it is so in the burial [of each], much more will it in the resurrection. And their rank is interchanged; kings assume that of servants and ministers, and subjects the dignity of kings, yea rather a brighter still. And that this is no piece of flattery, the truth itself demonstrates; for by those these have become more illustrious. For far greater reverence is paid to these tombs than to the other royal sepulchres; for there indeed is profound solitude, while here there is an immense concourse.

But if you will compare these tombs with the royal palaces, here again the palm remains with them. For there indeed there are many who keep off, but here many who invite and draw to them rich, poor, men, women, bond, free; there, is much fear; here, pleasure unutterable. 'But,' says one, 'it is a sweet sight to look on a king covered with gold and crowned, and standing by his side, generals, commanders, captains of horse and foot, lieutenants.' Well, but this of ours is so much grander and more awful that that must be judged, compared with it, to be stage scenery and child's play.

For the instant you have stepped across the threshold, at once the place sends up your thoughts to heaven, to the King above, to the army of the Angels, to the lofty throne, to the unapproachable glory. And here indeed He has put in the ruler's power, of his subjects to loose one, and bind another; but the bones of the saints possess no such pitiful and mean authority, but that which is far greater. For they summon demons and put them to the torture, and loose from those bitterest of all bonds, them that are bound.

What is more fearful than this tribunal? Though no one is seen, though no one piles the sides of the demon, yet are there cries, and tearings, lashes, tortures, burning tongues, because the demon cannot endure that marvellous power. And they that once wore bodies, are victorious over bodiless powers; [their] dust and bones and ashes rack those invisible natures. And therefore in truth it is that none would ever travel abroad to see the palaces of kings, but many kings and have often traveled to see this spectacle.

For the Martyries of the saints exhibit outlines and symbols of the judgment to come; in that demons are scourged, men chastened and delivered. Do you see the power of saints, even dead? Do you see the weakness of sinners, even living? Flee then wickedness, that you may have power over such; and pursue virtue with all your might. For if the case be thus here, consider what it will be in the world to come. And as being evermore possessed with this love, lay hold on the life eternal; whereunto may we all attain, through the grace and love towards men of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, might, honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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