

Hebrews 1:1-4

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the superiority of God's communication method through His Son, highlighting the Son's role in creation, His human nature, and the importance of purity, good works, and almsgiving.

Scripture: Matthew 5:22, Luke 16:9, Luke 21:2, Ephesians 5:27, Hebrews 1:1

Topics: "Christ's Supremacy", "Sin And Redemption"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the superiority of God speaking to us through His Son, Jesus Christ, compared to the prophets and angels. He emphasizes the abundant grace that surpasses sin, the importance of Christ purging our sins, and the need for believers to remain pure and avoid speaking evil. Chrysostom warns about the consequences of sinful actions and encourages almsgiving as a way to quench the fires of punishment and receive God's everlasting benefits through good works and a willing heart.

Transcript

God who at sundry times and in various manners spoke in time past unto the fathers by the Prophets, has at the end of the days spoken unto us by His Son whom He has appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds.

1. Truly, where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. Romans 5:20 This at least the blessed Paul intimates here also, in the very beginning of his Epistle to the Hebrews. For since as it was likely that afflicted, worn out by evils, and judging of things thereby, they would think themselves worse off than all other men, -- he shows that herein they had rather been made partakers of greater, even very exceeding, grace; arousing the hearer at the very opening of his discourse. Wherefore he says, God who at sundry times and in various manners spoke in times past unto the fathers by the Prophets, has at the end of the days spoken unto us by His Son.

Why did he [Paul] not oppose himself to the prophets? Certainly, he was much greater than they, inasmuch as a greater trust was committed to him. Yet he does not so. Why? First, to avoid speaking great things concerning himself. Secondly, because his hearers were not yet perfect. And thirdly, because he rather wished to exalt them, and to show that their superiority was great. As if he had said, What so great matter is it that He sent prophets to our fathers? For to us [He has sent] His own only-begotten Son Himself.

And well did he begin thus, At sundry times and in various manners, for he points out that not even the prophets themselves saw God; nevertheless, the Son saw Him. For the expressions, at sundry times and in various manners are the same as in different ways. For I (says He) have multiplied visions, and used similitudes by the ministry of the Prophets. Hosea 12:10 Wherefore the excellency consists not in this alone, that to them indeed prophets were sent, but to us the Son; but that none of them saw God, but the Only-begotten Son saw Him. He does not indeed at once assert this, but by what he says afterwards he establishes it, when he speaks concerning His human nature; For to which of the Angels said He, You are My Son, Hebrews 1:5, and, Sit on My right hand? Hebrews 1:13

And look on his great wisdom. First he shows the superiority from the prophets. Then having established this as acknowledged, he declares that to them indeed He spoke by the prophets, but to us by the Only-begotten. Then [He spoke] to them by Angels, and this again he establishes, with good reason (for angels also held converse with the Jews): yet even herein we have the superiority, inasmuch as the Master [spoke] to us, but to them servants, and prophets, fellow-servants.

2. Well also said he, at the end of the days, for by this he both stirs them up and encourages them desponding of the future. For as he says also in another place, The Lord is at hand, be careful for nothing Philippians 4:5-6, and again, For now is our salvation nearer than when we believed Romans 13:11: so also here. What then is it which he says? That whoever is spent in the conflict, when he hears of the end thereof, recovers his breath a little, knowing that it is the end indeed of his labors, but the beginning of his rest.

Hath in the end of the days spoken unto us in [His] Son. Behold again he uses the saying, in [His] Son, for through the Son, against those who assert that this phrase is proper to the Spirit. Do you see that the [word] in is through?

And the expression, In times past, and this, In the end of the days, shadows forth some other meaning:-- that when a long time had intervened, when we were on the edge of punishment, when the Gifts had failed, when there was no expectation of deliverance, when we were expecting to have less than all -- then we have had more.

And see how considerately he has spoken it. For he said not, Christ spoke (albeit it was He who did speak), but inasmuch as their souls were weak, and they were not yet able to hear the things concerning Christ, he says, God has spoken by Him. What do you mean? did God speak through the Son? Yes. What then? Is it thus you show the superiority? For here you have but pointed out that both the New and the Old [Covenants] are of One and the same: and that this superiority is not great. Wherefore he henceforth follows on upon this argument, saying, He spoke unto us by [His] Son.

(Note, how Paul makes common cause, and puts himself on a level with the disciples, saying, He spoke to us: and yet He did not speak to him, but to the Apostles, and through them to the many. But he lifts them [the Hebrews] up, and declares that He spoke also to them. And as yet he does not at all reflect on the Jews. For almost all to whom the prophets spoke, were a kind of evil and polluted persons. But as yet the discourse is not of these: but, hitherto of the gifts derived from God.)

Whom He appointed, says he, heir of all. What is whom He appointed heir of all? He speaks here of the flesh [the human nature]. As He also says in the second Psalm, Ask of Me, and I will give You the heathen for Your inheritance. Psalm 2:8 For no longer is Jacob the portion of the Lord nor Israel His inheritance Deuteronomy 32:9, but all men: that is to say, He has made Him Lord of all: which Peter also said in the

Acts, God has made Him both Lord and Christ. Acts 2:36 But he has used the name Heir, declaring two things: His proper sonship and His indefeasible sovereignty. Heir of all, that is, of all the world.

3. Then again he brings back his discourse to its former point. By whom also He made the worlds [the ages]. Where are those who say, There was [a time] when He was not?

Then, using degrees of ascent, he uttered that which is far greater than all this, saying,

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Who, (being the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power,) when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; being made so much better than the Angels as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

O! The wisdom of the Apostle! Or rather, not the wisdom of Paul, but the grace of the Spirit is the thing to wonder at. For surely he uttered not these things of his own mind, nor in that way did he find his wisdom. (For whence could it be? From the knife, and the skins, or the workshop?) But it was from the working of God. For his own understanding did not give birth to these thoughts, which was then so mean and slender as in nowise to surpass the baser sort; (for how could it, seeing it spent itself wholly on bargains and skins?) but the grace of the Spirit shows forth its strength by whomsoever it will.

For just as one, wishing to lead up a little child to some lofty place, reaching up even to the top of Heaven, does this gently and by degrees, leading him upwards by the steps from below -- then when he has set him on high, and bidden him to gaze downwards, and sees him turning giddy and confused, and dizzy, taking hold of him, he leads him down to the lower stand, allowing him to take breath; then when he has recovered it, leads him up again, and again brings him down -- just so did the blessed Paul likewise, both with the Hebrews and everywhere, having learned it from his Master. For even He also did so; sometimes He led His hearers up on high, and sometimes He brought them down, not allowing them to remain very long.

See him, then, even here -- by how many steps he led them up, and placed them near the very summit of religion, and then or ever they grow giddy, and are seized with dizziness, how he leads them again lower down, and allowing them to take breath, says, He spoke unto us by [His] Son, whom He appointed Heir of all things. For the name of Son is so far common. For where a true [Son] it is understood of, He is above all: but however that may be, for the present he proves that He is from above.

And see how he says it: Whom He appointed, says he, heir of all things. The phrase, He appointed Heir, is humble. Then he placed them on the higher step, adding, by whom also He made the worlds. Then on a higher still, and after which there is no other, who being the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person. Truly he has led them to unapproachable light, to the very brightness itself. And before they are blinded see how he gently leads them down again, saying, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty. He does not simply say, He sat down, but after the purifying, He sat down, for he has touched on the Incarnation, and his utterance is again lowly.

Then again having said a little by the way (for he says, on the right hand of the Majesty on high), [he turns] again to what is lowly; being made so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a

more excellent name than they. Henceforward then he treats here of that which is according to the flesh, since the phrase being made better does not express His essence according to the Spirit, (for that was not made but begotten,) but according to the flesh: for this was made. Nevertheless the discourse here is not about being called into existence. But just as John says, He that comes after me, is preferred before me John 1:15-30, that is, higher in honor and esteem; so also here, being made so much better than the angels-- that is, higher in esteem and better and more glorious, by how much He has obtained by inheritance a more excellent name than they. Do you see that he is speaking of that which is according to the flesh? For this Name, God the Word ever had; He did not afterwards obtain it by inheritance; nor did He afterwards become better than the Angels, when He had purged our sins; but He was always better, and better without all comparison. For this is spoken of Him according to the flesh.

So truly it is our way also, when we talk of man, to speak things both high and low. Thus, when we say, Man is nothing, Man is earth, Man is ashes, we call the whole by the worse part. But when we say, Man is an immortal animal, and Man is rational, and of kin to those on high, we call again the whole by the better part. So also, in the case of Christ, sometimes Paul discourses from the less and sometimes from the better; wishing both to establish the economy, and also to teach about the incorruptible nature.

4. Since then He has purged our sins, let us continue pure; and let us receive no stain, but preserve the beauty which He has implanted in us, and His comeliness undefiled and pure, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing. Ephesians 5:27 Even little sins are a spot and a wrinkle, such a thing, I mean, as Reproach, Insult, Falsehood.

Nay, rather not even are these small, but on the contrary very great: yea so great as to deprive a man even of the kingdom of Heaven. How, and in what manner? He that calls his brother fool, is in danger (He says) of hellfire. Matthew 5:22 But if it be so with him who calls a man fool, which seems to be the slightest of all things, and rather mere children's talk; what sentence of punishment will not he incur, who calls him malignant and crafty and envious, and casts at him ten thousand other reproaches? What more fearful than this?

Now suffer, I beseech you, the word [of exhortation]. For if he that does [anything] to one of the least, does it to Him Matthew 25:40, and he that does it not to one of the least does it not to Him Matthew 25:45, how is it not the same also in the matter of good or evil speaking? He that reviles his brother, reviles God: and he that honors his brother, honors God. Let us train therefore our tongue to speak good words. For refrain, it is said, your tongue from evil. Psalm 34:13 For God gave it not that we should speak evil, that we should revile, that we should calumniate one another; but to sing hymns to God withal, to speak those things which give grace to the hearers Ephesians 4:29, things for edification, things for profit.

Have you spoken evil of a man? What is your gain, entangling yourself in mischief together with him? For you have obtained the reputation of a slanderer. For there is not any, no not any evil, which stops at him that suffers it, but it includes the doer also. As for instance, the envious person seems indeed to plot against another, but himself first reaps the fruit of his sin, wasting and wearing himself away, and being hated of all men. The cheat deprives another of his money; yea and himself too of men's good will: and causes himself to be evil spoken of by all men. Now reputation is much better than money, for the one it is not easy to wash out, whereas it is easy to gain possession of the other. Or rather, the absence of the one does no hurt to him that wants it; but the absence of the other makes you reproached and ridiculed, and an object of enmity and warfare to all.

The passionate man again first punishes and tears himself in pieces, and then him with whom he is angry.

Just so the evil speaker disgraces first himself and then him who is evil-spoken of: or, it may be, even this has proved beyond his power, and while he departs with the credit of a foul and detestable kind of person, he causes the other to be loved the more. For when a man hearing a bad name given him, does not requite the giver in the same kind, but praises and admires, he does not praise the other, but himself. For I before observed that, as calumnies against our neighbors first touch those who devise the mischief, so also good works done towards our neighbors, gladden first those who do them. The parent either of good, or evil, justly reaps the fruit of it first himself. And just as water, whether it be brackish or sweet, fills the vessels of those who resort to it, but lessens not the fountain which sends it forth; so surely also, both wickedness and virtue, from whatever person they proceed, prove either his joy or his ruin.

So far as to the things of this world; but what speech may recount the things of that world, either the goods or the evils? There is none. For as to the blessings, they surpass all thought, not speech only; for their opposites are expressed indeed in terms familiar to us. For fire, it is said, is there, and darkness, and bonds, and a worm that never dies. But this represents not only the things which are spoken of, but others more intolerable. And to convince you, consider at once this first: if it be fire, how is it also darkness? Do you see how that fire is more intolerable than this? For it has no light. If it be fire, how is it forever burning? Do you see how something more intolerable than this happens? For it is not quenched. Yea, therefore it is called unquenchable. Let us then consider how great a misery it must be, to be forever burning, and to be in darkness, and to utter unnumbered groanings, and to gnash the teeth, and not even to be heard. For if here any one of those ingeniously brought up, should he be cast into prison, speaks of the mere ill savor, and the being laid in darkness, and the being bound with murderers, as more intolerable than any death: think what it is when we are burning with the murderers of the whole world, neither seeing nor being seen, but in so vast a multitude thinking that we are alone. For the darkness and gloom does not allow our distinguishing those who are near to us, but each will burn as if he were thus suffering alone. Moreover, if darkness of itself afflicts and terrifies our souls, how then will it be when together with the darkness there are likewise so great pains and burnings?

Wherefore I entreat you to be ever revolving these things with yourselves, and to submit to the pain of the words, that we may not undergo the punishment of the things. For assuredly, all these things shall be, and those whose doings have deserved those chambers of torture no man shall rescue, not father, nor mother, nor brother. For a brother redeems not, He says; shall a man redeem? Psalm 49:7, Septuagint, though he have much confidence, though he have great power with God. For it is He Himself who rewards every one according to his works, and upon these depends our salvation or punishment.

Let us make then to ourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness Luke 16:9, that is: Let us give alms; let us exhaust our possessions upon them, that so we may exhaust that fire: that we may quench it, that we may have boldness there. For there also it is not they who receive us, but our own work: for that it is not simply their being our friends which can save us, learn from what is added. For why did He not say, Make to yourselves friends, that they may receive you into their everlasting habitations, but added also the manner? For saying, of the mammon of unrighteousness, He points out that we must make friends of them by means of our possessions, showing that mere friendship will not protect us, unless we have good works, unless we spend righteously the wealth unrighteously gathered.

Moreover, this our discourse, of Almsgiving I mean, fits not only the rich, but also the needy. Yea even if there be any person who supports himself by begging, even for him is this word. For there is no one, so

poverty-stricken, however exceeding poor he may be, as not to be able to provide two mites. Luke 21:2 It is therefore possible that a person giving a small sum from small means, should surpass those who have large possessions and give more; as that widow did. For not by the measure of what is given, but by the means and willingness of the givers is the extent of the alms-deed estimated. In all cases the will is needed, in all, a right disposition; in all, love towards God. If with this we do all things, though having little we give little, God will not turn away His face, but will receive it as great and admirable: for He regards the will, not the gifts: and if He see that to be great, He assigns His decrees and judges accordingly, and makes them partakers of His everlasting benefits.

Which may God grant us all to obtain, by the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom to the Father together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, power, honor, now and for ever, and world without end. Amen.

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