

Hebrews 11:3-6

by St. John Chrysostom

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, and it is the key to seeking God and receiving His reward.

Scripture: Proverbs 14:29, Matthew 7:7, Hebrews 11:3-5

Topics: "Faith And Trust", "Pleasing God"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the power of faith, emphasizing how faith surpasses human reasoning and understanding, enabling believers to grasp the unseen and trust in God's promises. He highlights the examples of Abel and Enoch, showcasing how their faith led to righteousness and divine favor, even in the face of challenges and persecution. Chrysostom encourages believers to seek God diligently, comparing the search for God to the fervent pursuit of lost treasures or loved ones, stressing the importance of faith in pleasing God and receiving His rewards.

Transcript

Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God; so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear. By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaks.

1. Faith needs a generous and vigorous soul, and one rising above all things of sense, and passing beyond the weakness of human reasonings. For it is not possible to become a believer, otherwise than by raising one's self above the common customs [of the world].

Inasmuch then as the souls of the Hebrews were thoroughly weakened, and though they had begun from faith, yet from circumstances, I mean sufferings, afflictions, they had afterwards become faint-hearted, and of little spirit, and were shaken from [their position], he encouraged them first indeed from these very things, saying, Call to remembrance the former days Hebrews 10:32; next from the Scripture saying, But the just shall live by faith Hebrews 10:38; afterwards from arguments, saying, But Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1 And now again from their forefathers, those great and admirable men, as much as saying; If where the good things were close at hand, all were saved by faith, much more are we.

For when a soul finds one that shares the same sufferings with itself, it is refreshed and recovers breath. This we may see both in the case of Faith, and in the case of affliction: that there may be comfort for you it is said through our mutual faith. Romans 1:12 For mankind are very distrustful, and cannot place confidence in themselves, are fearful about whatever things they think they possess, and have great regard for the opinion of the many.

2. What then does Paul do? He encourages them by the fathers; and before that by the common notions [of mankind]. For tell me, he says, since Faith is calumniated as being a thing without demonstration and rather a matter of deceit, therefore he shows that the greatest things are attained through faith and not through reasonings. And how does he show this, tell me? It is manifest, he says, that God made the things which are, out of things which are not, things which appear, out of things which appear not, things which subsist, out of things which subsist not. But whence [is it shown] that He did this even by a Word? For reason suggests nothing of this kind; but on the contrary, that the things which appear are [formed] out of things which appear.

Therefore the philosophers expressly say that 'nothing comes out of things that are not' being sensual Jude 19, and trusting nothing to Faith. And yet these same men, when they happen to say anything great and noble, are caught entrusting it to Faith. For instance, that God is without beginning, and unborn ; for reason does not suggest this, but the contrary. And consider, I beseech you, their great folly. They say that God is without beginning; and yet this is far more wonderful than the [creation] out of things that are not. For to say, that He is without beginning, that He is unborn, neither begotten by Himself nor by another is more full of difficulties, than to say that God made the things which are, out of things which are not. For here there are many things uncertain: as, that some one made it, that what was made had a beginning, that, in a word, it was made. But in the other case, what? He is self-existing, unborn, He neither had beginning nor time; tell me, do not these things require faith? But he did not assert this, which was far greater, but the lesser.

Whence [does it appear], he would say, that God made these things? Reason does not suggest it; no one was present when it was done. Whence is it shown? It is plainly the result of faith. Through faith we understand that the worlds were made. Why through faith? Because the things that are seen were not made of things which do appear. For this is Faith.

3. Having thus stated the general [principle], he afterwards tests it by individuals. For a man of note is equivalent to the world. This at all events he afterwards hinted. For when he had matched it against one or two hundred persons, and then saw the smallness of the number, he afterwards says, by whom the world was outweighed in worth. Hebrews 11:38

And observe whom he puts first, him who was ill-treated, and that by a brother. It was their own affliction, For you also (he says) have suffered like things of your own countrymen. 1 Thessalonians 2:14 And by a brother who had been nothing wronged, but who envied him on God's account; showing that they also are looked on with an evil eye and envied. He honored God, and died because he honored Him: and has not yet attained to a resurrection. But his readiness is manifest, and his part has been done, but God's part has not yet been carried out towards him.

And by a more excellent sacrifice in this place, he means that which is more honorable, more splendid, more necessary.

And we cannot say (he says) that it was not accepted. He did accept it, and said to Cain, [Have you] not [sinned], if you rightly offer, but dost not rightly divide? Genesis 4:7, Septuagint So then Abel both rightly offered, and rightly divided. Nevertheless for this, what recompense did he receive? He was slain by his brother's hand: and that sentence which his father endured on account of sin, this he first received who was upright. And he suffered so much the more grievously because it was from a brother, and he was the first [to suffer].

And he did these things rightly looking to no man. For to whom could he look, when he so honored God? To his father and his mother? But they had outraged Him in return for His benefits. To his brother then? But he also had dishonored [God]. So that by himself he sought out what was good.

And he that is worthy of so great honor, what does he suffer? He is put to death. And how too was he otherwise testified of that he was righteous? It is said, that fire came down and consumed the sacrifices. For instead of [And the Lord] had respect to Abel and to his sacrifices Genesis 4:4, the Syriac said, And He set them on fire. He therefore who both by word and deed bore witness to the righteous man and sees him slain for His sake, did not avenge him, but left him to suffer.

But your case is not such: for how could it be? You who have both prophets and examples, and encouragements innumerable, and signs and miracles accomplished? Hence that was faith indeed. For what miracles did he see, that he might believe he should have any recompense of good things? Did he not choose virtue from Faith alone?

What is, and by it he being dead yet speaks? That he might not cast them into great despondency, he shows that he has in part obtained a recompense. How? 'The influence coming from him is great, he means, and he yet speaks; that is, [Cain] slew him, but he did not with him slay his glory and memory. He is not dead; therefore neither shall you die. For by how much the more grievous a man's sufferings are, so much the greater is his glory.'

How does he yet speak? This is a sign both of his being alive, and of his being by all celebrated, admired, counted blessed. For he who encourages others to be righteous, speaks. For no speech avails so much, as that man's suffering. As then heaven by its mere appearance speaks, so also does he by being had in remembrance. Not if he had made proclamation of himself, not if he had ten thousand tongues, and were alive, would he have been so admired as now. That is, these things do not take place with impunity, nor lightly, neither do they pass away.

Hebrews 11:5-6

4. By faith Enoch was translated, that he should not see death, and was not found, because God had translated him. This man displayed greater faith than Abel. How (you ask)? Because, although he came after him, yet what befell [Abel] was sufficient to guide him back. How? God foreknew that [Abel] would be killed. For He said to Cain: You have sinned: do not add thereto. Honored by him, He did not protect him. And yet neither did this throw him [Enoch] into indifference. He said not to himself, 'What need of toils and dangers? Abel honored God, yet He did not protect him. For what advantage had he that was departed, from the punishment of his brother? And what benefit could he reap therefrom? Let us allow that he suffers severe punishment: what is that to him who has been slain?' He neither said nor thought anything of this kind, but passing beyond all these things, he knew that if there is a God, certainly there is a Rewarder also: although as yet they knew nothing of a resurrection. But if they who as yet know nothing of a resurrection, and see contradictory things here, thus pleased [God], how much more should we? For

they neither knew of a resurrection, nor had they any examples to look to. This same thing then made [Enoch] well-pleasing [to God], namely, that he received nothing. For he knew that [God] is a rewarder. Whence [knew he this]? For He recompensed Abel, do you say? So that reason suggested other things, but faith the opposite of what was seen. Even then (he would say) if you see that you receive nothing here, be not troubled.

How was it by faith that Enoch was translated? Because his pleasing [God] was the cause of his translation, and faith [the cause] of his pleasing [Him]. For if he had not known that he should receive a reward, how could he have pleased [Him]? But without faith it is impossible to please Him. How? If a man believe that there is a God and a retribution, he will have the reward. Whence then is the well-pleasing?

5. It is necessary to believe that He is, not 'what He is.' If that He is needs Faith, and not reasonings; it is impossible to comprehend by reasoning 'what He is.' If that He is a rewarder needs Faith and not reasonings, how is it possible by Reasoning to compass His essence? For what Reasoning can reach this? For some persons say that the things that exist are self-caused. Do you see that unless we have Faith in regard to all things, not only in regard to retribution, but also in regard to the very being of God, all is lost to us?

But many ask whither Enoch was translated, and why he was translated, and why he did not die, neither he nor Elijah, and, if they are still alive, how they live, and in what form. But to ask these things is superfluous. For that the one was translated, and that the other was taken up, the Scriptures have said; but where they are, and how they are, they have not added: For they say nothing more than is necessary. For this indeed took place, I mean his translation, immediately at the beginning, the human soul [thereby] receiving a hope of the destruction of death, and of the overthrow of the devil's tyranny, and that death will be done away; for he was translated, not dead, but that he should not see death.

Therefore he added, he was translated alive, because he was well-pleasing [unto God]. For just as a Father when he has threatened his son, wishes indeed immediately after he has threatened, to relax his threat, but endures and continues resolute, that for a time he may chasten and correct him, allowing the threat to remain firm; so also God, to speak as it were after the manner of men, did not continue resolute, but immediately showed that death is done away. And first He allows death to happen, wishing to terrify the father through the son: For wishing to show that the sentence is verily fixed, He subjected to this punishment not wicked men at once, but him even who was well-pleasing, I mean, the blessed Abel; and almost immediately after him, He translated Enoch. Moreover, He did not raise the former, lest they should immediately grow bold; but He translated the other being yet alive: having excited fear by Abel, but by this latter giving zeal to be well-pleasing unto Him. Wherefore they who say that all things are ruled and governed of themselves, and do not expect a reward, are not well-pleasing; as neither are the heathen. For He becomes a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him by works and by knowledge.

6. Since then we have a rewarder, let us do all things that we may not be deprived of the rewards of virtue. For indeed the neglecting such a recompense, the scorning such a reward, is worthy of many tears. For as to those who diligently seek Him, He is a rewarder, so to those who seek Him not, the contrary.

Seek (He says) and you shall find Matthew 7:7: but how can we find the Lord? Consider how gold is found; with much labor. [I sought the Lord] with my hands (it is said) by night before Him, and I was not deceived Psalm 76:2, that is, just as we seek what is lost, so let us seek God. Do we not concentrate our mind thereon? Do we not enquire of every one? Do we not travel from home? Do we not promise money?

For instance, suppose that any among us has lost his son, what do we not do? What land, what sea do we not make the circuit of? Do we not reckon money, and houses, and everything else as secondary to the finding him? And should we find him, we cling to him, we hold him fast, we do not let him go. And when we are going to seek anything whatever, we busy ourselves in all ways to find what is sought. How much more ought we to do this in regard to God, as seeking what is indispensable; nay rather, not in the same way, but much more! But since we are weak, at least seek God as you seek your money or your son. Will you not leave your home for Him? Have you never left your home for money? Do you not busy yourself in all ways? When you have found [it], are you not full of confidence?

7. Seek (He says) and you shall find. For things sought after need much care, especially in regard of God. For many are the hindrances, many the things that darken, many that impede our perception. For as the sun is manifest, and set forth publicly before all, and we have no need to seek it; but if on the other hand we bury ourselves and turn everything upside down, we need much labor to look at the sun; so truly here also, if we bury ourselves in the depth of evil desires, in the darkness of passions and of the affairs of this life, with difficulty do we look up, with difficulty do we raise our heads, with difficulty do we see clearly. He that is buried underground, in whatever degree he sees upwards, in that degree does he come towards the sun. Let us therefore shake off the earth, let us break through the mist which lies upon us. It is thick, and close, and does not allow us to see clearly.

And how, you say, is this cloud broken through? If we draw to ourselves the beams of the sun of righteousness. The lifting up of my hands (it is said) is an evening sacrifice. Psalm 141:2 With our hands let us also lift up our mind: ye who have been initiated know what I mean, perhaps too ye recognize the expression, and see at a glance what I have hinted at. Let us raise up our thoughts on high.

I myself know many men almost suspended apart from the earth, and beyond measure stretching up their hands, and out of heart because it is not possible to be lifted into the air, and thus praying with earnestness. Thus I would have you always, and if not always, at least very often; and if not very often, at least now and then, at least in the morning, at least in the evening prayers. For, tell me, can you not stretch forth the hands? Stretch forth the will, stretch forth as far as you will, yea even to heaven itself. Even should you wish to touch the very summit, even if you would ascend higher and walk thereon, it is open to you. For our mind is lighter, and higher than any winged creature. And when it receives grace from the Spirit, O! How swift is it! How quick is it! How does it compass all things! How does it never sink down or fall to the ground! These wings let us provide for ourselves: by means of them shall we be able to fly even across the tempestuous sea of this present life. The swiftest birds fly unhurt over mountains, and woods, and seas, and rocks, in a brief moment of time. Such also is the mind; when it is winged, when it is separated from the things of this life, nothing can lay hold of it, it is higher than all things, even than the fiery darts of the devil.

The devil is not so good a marksman, as to be able to reach this height; he sends forth his darts indeed, for he is void of all shame, yet he does not hit the mark; the dart returns to him without effect, and not without effect only, but it [falls] upon his own head. For what is sent forth by him must of necessity strike [something]. As then, that which has been shot out by men, either strikes the person against whom it is directed, or pierces bird, or fence, or garment, or wood, or the mere air, so does the dart of the devil also. It must of necessity strike; and if it strike not him that is shot at, it necessarily strikes him that shoots it. And we may learn from many instances, that when we are not hit, without doubt he is hit himself. For instance, he plotted against Job: he did not hit him, but was struck himself. He plotted against Paul, he did not hit him, but was struck himself. If we watch, we may see this happening everywhere. For even when he

strikes, he is hit; much more then [when he does not hit].

8. Let us turn his weapons then against himself, and having armed and fortified ourselves with the shield of faith, let us keep guard with steadfastness, so as to be impregnable. Now the dart of the devil is evil concupiscence. Anger especially is a fire, a flame; it catches, destroys, consumes; let us quench it, by longsuffering, by forbearance. For as red-hot iron dipped into water, loses its fire, so an angry man filling in with a patient one does no harm to the patient man, but rather benefits him, and is himself more thoroughly subdued.

For nothing is equal to longsuffering. Such a man is never insulted; but as bodies of adamant are not wounded, so neither are such souls. For they are above the reach of the darts. The longsuffering man is high, and so high as not to receive a wound from the shot. When one is furious, laugh; but do not laugh openly, lest you irritate him: but laugh mentally on his account. For in the case of children, when they strike us passionately, as though forsooth they were avenging themselves, we laugh. If then thou laugh, there will be as great difference between you and him, as between a child and a man: but if you are furious you have made yourself a child. For the angry are more senseless than children. If one look at a furious child, does he not laugh at him? The poor-spirited (it is said) is mightily simple. Proverbs 14:29 The simple then is a child: and he who is longsuffering (it is said) is abundant in wisdom. This abundant wisdom then let us follow after, that we may attain to the good things promised us in Christ Jesus our Lord, 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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