

Hebrews 12:4-10

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom emphasizes the necessity of suffering and chastisement as expressions of God's love and pathways to holiness for His children.

Scripture: Romans 13:14, Hebrews 12:7-10

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Divine Discipline"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of enduring suffering and chastisement as a sign of God's love and discipline. He emphasizes that afflictions are necessary for spiritual growth and holiness, drawing examples from the Scriptures and the experiences of fathers. Chrysostom encourages believers to embrace chastisement as a means to partake in God's holiness and to strengthen their souls through work and discipline, rather than indulging in luxury and excess which lead to spiritual and physical harm.

Transcript

You have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when you are rebuked of Him. For whom the Lord loves, He chastens: and scourges every son whom He receives.

1. There are two kinds of consolation, apparently opposed to one another, but yet contributing great strength each to the other; both of which he has here put forward. The one is when we say that persons have suffered much: for the soul is refreshed, when it has many witnesses of its own sufferings, and this he introduced above, saying, Call to mind the former days, in which after ye had been illuminated ye endured a great fight of afflictions. Hebrews 10:32 The other is when we say, You have suffered no great thing. The former, when [the soul] has been exhausted refreshes it, and makes it recover breath: the latter, when it has become indolent and supine, turns it again and pulls down pride. Thus that no pride may spring up in them from that testimony [to their sufferings], see what he does. You have not yet (he says) resisted unto blood, [striving] against sin. And he did not at once go on with what follows, but after having shown them all those who had stood unto blood, and then brought in the glory of Christ, His sufferings, he afterwards easily pursued his discourse. This he says also in writing to the Corinthians, There has no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man 1 Corinthians 10:13, that is, small. For this is enough to arouse and set right the soul, when it considers that it has not risen to the whole [trial], and encourages itself from what has already befallen it.

What he means is this: You have not yet submitted to death; your loss has extended to money, to reputation, to being driven from place to place. Christ however shed His blood for you, while you have not [done it] for yourselves. He contended for the Truth even unto death fighting for you; while you have not yet entered upon dangers that threaten death.

And you have forgotten the exhortation. That is, And you have slackened your hands, you have become faint. You have not yet, he said, resisted unto blood, striving against sin. Here he indicates that sin is both very vigorous, and is itself armed. For the [expression] You have resisted [stood firm against], is used with reference to those who stand firm.

2. Which (he says) speaks unto you as unto sons, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when you are rebuked of Him. He has drawn his encouragement from the facts themselves; over and above he adds also that which is drawn from arguments, from this testimony.

Faint not (he says) when you are rebuked of Him. It follows that these things are of God. For this too is no small matter of consolation, when we learn that it is God's work that such things have power, He allowing [them]; even as also Paul says; He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. 2 Corinthians 12:9 He it is who allows [them].

For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. You can not say that any righteous man is without affliction: even if he appear to be so, yet we know not his other afflictions. So that of necessity every righteous man must pass through affliction. For it is a declaration of Christ, that the wide and broad way leads to destruction, but the strait and narrow one to life. Matthew 7:13-14 If then it is possible to enter into life by that means, and is not by any other, then all have entered in by the narrow [way], as many as have departed unto life.

Hebrews 12:7

You endure chastisement (he says); not for punishment, nor for vengeance, nor for suffering. See, from that from which they supposed they had been deserted [of God], from these he says they may be confident, that they have not been deserted. It is as if he had said, Because you have suffered so many evils, do you suppose that God has left you and hates you? If you did not suffer, then it were right to suppose this. For if He scourges every son whom He receives, he who is not scourged, perhaps is not a son. What then, you say, do not bad men suffer distress? They suffer indeed; how then? He did not say, Every one who is scourged is a son, but every son is scourged. For in all cases He scourges His son: what is wanted then is to show, whether any son is not scourged. But you would not be able to say: there are many wicked men also who are scourged, such as murderers, robbers, sorcerers, plunderers of tombs. These however are paying the penalty of their own wickedness, and are not scourged as sons, but punished as wicked: but you as sons.

Hebrews 12:8

3. Then again [he argues] from the general custom. Do you see how he brings up arguments from all quarters, from facts in the Scripture, from its words, from our own notions, from examples in ordinary life? Hebrews 12:8 But if you be without chastisement [&c.]. Do you see that he said what I just mentioned, that it is not possible to be a son without being chastened? For as in families, fathers care not for bastards, though they learn nothing, though they be not distinguished, but fear for their legitimate sons lest they should be indolent, [so here.]. If then not to be chastised is [a mark] of bastards, we ought to rejoice at

chastisement, if this be [a sign] of legitimacy. God deals with you as with sons; for this very cause.

Hebrews 12:9

Furthermore, we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence. Again, [he reasons] from their own experiences, from what they themselves suffered. For as he says above, Call to mind the former days Hebrews 10:32, so here also God (he says) deals with you as with sons, and you could not say, We cannot bear it: yea, as with sons tenderly beloved. For if they reverence their fathers of the flesh, how shall not you reverence your heavenly Father?

However the difference arises not from this alone, nor from the persons, but also from the cause itself, and from the fact. For it is not on the same grounds that He and they inflict chastisement: but they [did it] with a view to what seemed good to them, that is, fulfilling [their own] pleasure oftentimes, and not always looking to what was expedient. But here, that cannot be said. For He does this not for any interest of His own but for you, and for your benefit alone. They [did it] that you might be useful to themselves also, oftentimes without reason; but here there is nothing of this kind. Do you see that this also brings consolation? For we are most closely attached to those [earthly parents], when we see that not for any interests of their own they either command or advise us: but their earnestness is, wholly and solely, on our account. For this is genuine love, and love in reality, when we are beloved though we be of no use to him who loves us -- not that he may receive, but that he may impart. He chastens, He does everything, He uses all diligence, that we may become capable of receiving His benefits.

Hebrews 12:10

For they verily (he says) for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure, but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness. Hebrews 12:10

What is of his holiness? It is, of His purity, so as to become worthy of Him, according to our power. He earnestly desires that you may receive, and He does all that He may give you: do ye not earnestly endeavor that you may receive? I said to the Lord (one says) You are my Lord, for of my good things You have no need. Psalm 16:2

Furthermore, he says, we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection to the Father of spirits, and live? (To the Father of spirits, whether of spiritual gifts, or of prayers, or of the incorporeal powers.) If we die thus, then we shall live. For they indeed for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure, for what seems [so] is not always profitable, but He for our profit.

4. Therefore chastisement is profitable; therefore chastisement is a participation of holiness. Yea and this greatly: for when it casts out sloth, and evil desire, and love of the things of this life, when it helps the soul, when it causes a light esteem of all things here (for affliction [does] this), is it not holy? Does it not draw down the grace of the Spirit?

Let us consider the righteous, from what cause they all shone brightly forth. Was it not from affliction? And, if you will, let us enumerate them from the first and from the very beginning: Abel, Noah himself; for it is not possible that he, being the only one in that so great multitude of the wicked, should not have been afflicted; for it is said, Noah being alone perfect in his generation, pleased God. Genesis 6:9 For consider, I beseech you, if now, when we have innumerable persons whose virtue we may emulate, fathers, and

children, and teachers, we are thus distressed, what must we suppose he suffered, alone among so many? But should I speak of the circumstances of that strange and wonderful rain? Or should I speak of Abraham, his wanderings one upon another, the carrying away of his wife, the dangers, the wars, the famines? Should I speak of Isaac, what fearful things he underwent, driven from every place, and laboring in vain, and toiling for others? Or of Jacob? For indeed to enumerate all his [afflictions] is not necessary, but it is reasonable to bring forward the testimony, which he himself [gave] when speaking with Pharaoh; Few and evil are my days, and they have not attained to the days of my fathers. Genesis 47:9 Or should I speak of Joseph himself? Or of Moses? Or of Joshua? Or of David? Or of Elijah? Or of Samuel? Or would you [that I speak] of all the prophets? Will you not find that all these were made illustrious from their afflictions? Tell me then, dost thou desire to become illustrious from ease and luxury? But you can not.

Or should I speak of the Apostles? Nay but they went beyond all. And Christ said this, In the world you shall have tribulation. John 16:33 And again, You shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice. John 16:20 And, that Strait and narrow is the way that leads unto life. Matthew 7:14 The Lord of the way said, that it is narrow and strait; and do you seek the broad [way]? How is this not unreasonable? In consequence you will not arrive at life, going another [way], but at destruction, for you have chosen the [path] which leads there.

Would you that I bring before you those [that live] in luxury? Let us ascend from the last to the first. The rich man who is burning in the furnace; the Jews who live for the belly, whose god is their belly Philippians 3:19, who were ever seeking ease in the wilderness, were destroyed; as also those in Sodom, on account of their gluttony; and those in the time of Noah, was it not because they chose this soft and dissolute life? For they luxuriated, it says, in fullness of bread. Ezekiel 16:49 It speaks of those in Sodom. But if fullness of bread wrought so great evil, what should we say of other delicacies? Esau, was not he in ease? And what of those who being of the sons of God Genesis 6:2, looked on women, and were borne down the precipice? And what of those who were maddened by inordinate lust? And all the kings of the nations, of the Babylonians, of the Egyptians, did they not perish miserably? Are they not in torment?

5. And as to things now, tell me, are they not the same? Hear Christ saying, They that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses Matthew 11:8, but they who do not [wear] such things, are in Heaven. For the soft garment relaxes even the austere soul, breaks it and enervates it: yea, even if it meet with a body rough and hard, it speedily by such delicate treatment makes it soft and weak.

For, tell me, for what other reason do you suppose women are so weak? Is it from their sex only? By no means: but from their way of living, and their bringing up. For their avoiding exposure, their inactivity, their baths, their ointments, their multitude of perfumes, the delicate softness of their couches, makes them in the end such as they are.

And that you may understand, attend to what I say. Tell me; take from a garden a tree from those standing in the uncultivated part and beaten by the winds, and plant it in a moist and shady place, and you will find it very unworthy of that from which you originally took it. And that this is true, [appears from the fact that] women brought up in the country are stronger than citizens of towns: and they would overcome many such in wrestling. For when the body becomes more effeminate, of necessity the soul also shares the mischief, since, for the most part, its energies are affected in accordance with the [body]. For in illness we are different persons owing to weakness, and when we become well, we are different again. For as in the case of a string when the tones are weak and relaxed, and not well arranged, the excellence of the art is also destroyed, being obliged to serve the ill condition of the strings: so in the case of the body also, the

soul receives from it many hurts, many necessities. For when it needs much nursing, the other endures a bitter servitude.

6. Wherefore, I beseech you, let us make it strong by work, and not nurse it as an invalid. My discourse is not to men only but to women also. For why do you, O woman, continually enfeeble [your body] with luxury and exhaust it? Why do you ruin your strength with fat? This fat is flabbiness, not strength. Whereas, if you break off from these things, and manage yourself differently, then will your personal beauty also improve according to your wish, when strength and a good habit of body are there. If however thou beset it with ten thousand diseases, there will neither be bloom of complexion, nor good health; for you will always be in low spirits. And you know that as when the air is smiling it makes a beautiful house look splendid, so also cheerfulness of mind when added to a fair countenance, makes it better: but if [a woman] is in low spirits and in pain she becomes more ill-looking. But diseases and pains produce low spirits; and diseases are produced from the body too delicate through great luxury. So that even for this you will flee luxury, if you take my advice.

'But, you will say, luxury gives pleasure.' Yes, but not so great as the annoyances. And besides, the pleasure goes no further than the palate and the tongue. For when the table has been removed, and the food swallowed, you will be like one that has not partaken, or rather much worse, in that you bear thence oppression, and distension, and headache, and a sleep like death, and often too, sleeplessness from repletion, and obstruction of the breathing, and eructation. And you would curse bitterly your belly, when you ought to curse your immoderate eating.

7. Let us not then fatten the body, but listen to Paul saying, Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof, Romans 13:14 As if one should take food and throw it into a drain, so is he who throws it into the belly: or rather it is not so, but much worse. For in the one case he uses the drain without harm to himself: but in the other he generates innumerable diseases. For what nourishes is a sufficiency which also can be digested: but what is over and above our need, not only does not nourish, but even spoils the other. But no man sees these things, owing to some prejudice and unseasonable pleasure.

Do you wish to nourish the body? Take away what is superfluous; give what is sufficient, and as much as can be digested. Do not load it, lest you overwhelm it. A sufficiency is both nourishment and pleasure. For nothing is so productive of pleasure, as food well digested: nothing so [productive of] health: nothing [so productive of] acuteness of the faculties, nothing tends so much to keep away disease. For a sufficiency is both nourishment, and pleasure, and health; but excess is injury, and unpleasantness and disease. For what famine does, that also satiety does; or rather more grievous evils. For the former indeed within a few days carries a man off and sets him free; but the other eating into and putrefying the body, gives it over to long disease, and then to a most painful death. But we, while we account famine a thing greatly to be dreaded, yet run after satiety, which is more distressing than that.

Whence is this disease? Whence this madness? I do not say that we should waste ourselves away, but that we should eat as much food as also gives us pleasure, that is really pleasure, and can nourish the body, and furnish it to us well ordered and adapted for the energies of the soul, well joined and fitted together. But when it comes to be water-logged by luxury, it cannot in the flood-wave, keep fast the bolts themselves, as one may say, and joints which hold the frame together. For the flood-wave coming in, the whole breaks up and scatters.

Make not provision for the flesh (he says) to fulfill the lusts thereof. Romans 13:14 He said well. For luxury is fuel for unreasonable lusts; though the luxurious should be the most philosophical of all men, of necessity he must be somewhat affected by wine, by eating, he must needs be relaxed, he must needs endure the greater flame. Hence [come] fornications, hence adulteries. For a hungry belly cannot generate lust, or rather not one which has used just enough. But that which generates unseemly lusts, is that which is relaxed by luxury. And as land which is very moist and a dung-hill which is wet through and retains much dampness, generates worms, while that which has been freed from such moistness bears abundant fruits, when it has nothing immoderate: even if it be not cultivated, it yields grass, and if it be cultivated, fruits: [so also do we].

Let us not then make our flesh useless, or unprofitable, or hurtful, but let us plant in it useful fruits, and fruit-bearing trees; let us not enfeeble them by luxury, for they too put forth worms instead of fruit when they have become rotten. So also implanted desire, if you moisten it above measure, generates unreasonable pleasures, yea the most exceedingly unreasonable. Let us then remove this pernicious evil, that we may be able to attain the good things promised us, in Christ Jesus our Lord, with whom to the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, be glory now and ever and world without end. Amen.

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