

Hebrews 1:3-5

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the need for reverence and humility when speaking of God, and highlights the Son's equality with the Father and His superiority to angels.

Scripture: Psalm 90:2, Luke 17:10, John 1:1, John 8:12, 1 Corinthians 2:9, 1 Corinthians 7:29, Philippians 4:7, Hebrews 1:3

Topics: "Christology", "Trinity"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the reverence and awe we should have when speaking or hearing about God, as our understanding falls short of comprehending His greatness. He highlights the Son's role as the brightness of God's glory and the express image of His person, upholding all things by the word of His power, showing His absolute authority and equal honor with the Father. Chrysostom warns against falling into erroneous beliefs like Sabellianism, Arianism, or denying Christ's origin, affirming Christ's unique role as the Creator and sustainer of all things. He underscores the Son's care for humanity by purging our sins through His sacrifice, sitting at the right hand of God, and being made better than the angels, obtaining a more excellent name through His inheritance.

Transcript

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.

1. Everywhere indeed a reverential mind is requisite, but especially when we say or hear anything of God: Since neither can tongue speak nor thought hear anything suitable to our God. And why speak I of tongue or thought? For not even the understanding which far excels these, will be able to comprehend anything accurately, when we desire to utter anything concerning God. For if the peace of God surpasses all understanding Philippians 4:7, and the things which are prepared for them that love Him have not entered into the heart of man 1 Corinthians 2:9; much more He Himself, the God of peace, the Creator of all things, does by a wide measure exceed our reasoning. We ought therefore to receive all things with faith and reverence, and when our discourse fails through weakness, and is not able to set forth accurately the things which are spoken, then especially to glorify God, for that we have such a God, surpassing both our thought and our conception. For many of our conceptions about God, we are unable to express, as also many things we express, but have not strength to conceive of them. As for instance:-- That God is everywhere, we know; but how, we no longer understand. That there is a certain incorporeal power the cause of all our good things, we know: but how it is, or what it is, we know not. Lo! We speak, and do not

understand. I said, That He is everywhere, but I do not understand it. I said, That He is without beginning, but I do not understand it. I said, That He begot from Himself, and again I know not how I shall understand it. And some things there are which we may not even speak -- as for instance, thought conceives but cannot utter.

And to show you that even Paul is weak and does not put out his illustrations with exactness; and to make you tremble and refrain from searching too far, hear what he says, having called Him Son and named Him Creator, Who being the brightness of His Glory, and the express image of His person.

This we must receive with reverence and clear of all incongruities. The brightness of His glory, says he. But observe in what reference he understands this, and so do thou receive it:-- that He is of Him: without passion: that He is neither greater, nor less; since there are some, who derive certain strange things from the illustration. For, say they, the brightness is not substantial, but has its being in another. Now do not thou, O man, so receive it, neither be thou sick of the disease of Marcellus and Photinus. For he has a remedy for you close at hand, that you fall not into that imagination, nor does he leave you to be hurried down into that fatal malady. And what says he? And the express image of His person [or subsistence]: that is, just as He [the Father] is personally subsisting, being in need of nothing, so also the Son. For he says this here, showing the undeviating similitude and the peculiar image of the Prototype, that He [the Son] is in subsistence by Himself.

For he who said above, that by Him He made all things here assigns to Him absolute authority. For what does he add? And upholding all things by the word of His power; that we might hence infer not merely His being the express image of His Person, but also His governing all things with absolute authority.

See then, how he applies to the Son that which is proper to the Father. For on this account he did not say simply, and upholding all things, nor did he say, by His power, but, by the word of His power. For much as just now we saw him gradually ascend and descend; so also now, as by steps, he goes up on high, then again descends, and says, by whom also He made the worlds.

Behold how here also he goes on two paths, by the one leading us away from Sabellius, by the other from Arius, yea and on another, that He [Christ] should not be accounted unoriginated, which he does also throughout, nor yet alien from God. For if, even after so much, there are some who assert that He is alien, and assign to Him another father, and say that He is at variance with Him -- had [Paul] not declared these things, what would they not have uttered?

How then does he this? When he is compelled to heal, then is he compelled also to utter lowly things: as for instance, He appointed Him (says he) heir of all things, and by Him He made the worlds. Hebrews 1:2 But that He might not be in another way dishonored, he brings Him up again to absolute authority and declares Him to be of equal honor with the Father, yea, so equal, that many thought Him to be the Father.

And observe thou his great wisdom. First he lays down the former point and makes it sure accurately. And when this is shown, that He is the Son of God, and not alien from Him, he thereafter speaks out safely all the high sayings, as many as he will. Since any high speech concerning Him, led many into the notion just mentioned, he first sets down what is humiliating and then safely mounts up as high as he pleases. And having said, whom He appointed heir of all things, and that by Him He made the worlds, he then adds, and upholding all things by the word of His power. For He that by a word only governs all things, could not be in need of any one, for the producing all things.

2. And to prove this, mark how again going forward, and laying aside the by whom, he assigns to Him absolute power. For after he had effected what he wished by the use of it, thenceforward leaving it, what says he? Thou Lord in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands. *infra*, Hebrews 1:10 Nowhere is there the saying by whom, or that by Him He made the worlds. What then? Were they not made by Him? Yes, but not, as you say or imaginest, as by an instrument: nor as though He would not have made them unless the Father had reached out a hand to Him. For as He judges no man John 5:22, and is said to judge by the Son, in that He begot Him a judge; so also, to create by Him, in that He begot Him a Creator. And if the Father be the original cause of Him, in that He is Father, much more of the things which have been made by Him. When therefore he would show that He is of Him, he speaks of necessity lowly things. But when he would utter high things, Marcellus takes a handle, and Sabellius; avoiding however the excess of both, he holds a middle [way]. For neither does he dwell on the humiliation, lest Paul of Samosata should obtain a standing place, nor yet does he for ever abide in the high sayings; but shows on the contrary His abundant nearness, lest Sabellius rush in upon him. He names Him Son, and immediately Paul of Samosata comes on him, saying that He is a son, as the many are. But he gives him a fatal wound, calling Him Heir. But yet, with Arius, he is shameless. For the saying, He appointed Him heir, they both hold: the former one saying, it comes of weakness; the other still presses objections, endeavoring to support himself by the clause which follows. For by saying, by whom also He made the worlds, he strikes backwards the impudent Samosatene: while Arius still seems to be strong. Nevertheless see how he smites him likewise, saying again, who being the brightness of His glory. But behold! Sabellius again springs on us, with Marcellus, and Photinus: but on all these also he inflicts one blow, saying, and the express image of His person and upholding all things by the word of His power. Here again he wounds Marcion too; not very severely, but however he does wound him. For through the whole of this Epistle he is fighting against them.

But the very thing which he said, the brightness of the glory, hear also Christ Himself saying, I am the Light of the world. John 8:12 Therefore he [the Apostle] uses the word brightness, showing that this was said in the sense of Light of Light. Nor is it this alone which he shows, but also that He has enlightened our souls; and He has Himself manifested the Father, and by the brightness he has indicated the nearness of the Being [of the Father and the Son]. Observe the subtlety of his expressions. He has taken one essence and subsistence to indicate two subsistences. Which he also does in regard to the knowledge of the Spirit ; for as he says that the knowledge of the Father is one with that of the Spirit, as being indeed one, and in nought varying from itself 1 Corinthians 2:10-12: so also here he has taken hold of one certain [thing] whereby to express the subsistence of the Two.

And he adds that He is the express Image. For the express Image is something other than its Prototype: yet not Another in all respects, but as to having real subsistence. Since here also the term, express image, indicates there is no variation from that whereof it is the express image: its similarity in all respects. When therefore he calls Him both Form, and express Image, what can they say? Yea, says he, man is also called an Image of God. What then! Is he so [an image of Him] as the Son is? No (says he) but because the term, image, does not show resemblance. And yet, in that man is called an Image, it shows resemblance, as in man. For what God is in Heaven, that man is on earth, I mean as to dominion. And as he has power over all things on earth, so also has God power over all things which are in heaven and which are on earth. But otherwise, man is not called Express image, he is not called Form: which phrase declares the substance, or rather both substance and similarity in substance. Therefore just as the form of a slave Philippians 2:6-7 expresses no other thing than a man without variation [from human nature], so also the form of God expresses no other thing than God.

Who being (says he) the brightness of His glory. See what Paul is doing. Having said, Who being the brightness of His glory, he added again, He sat down on the right hand of the Majesty: what names he has used, nowhere finding a name for the Substance. For neither the Majesty, nor the Glory sets forth the Name, which he wishes to say, but is not able to find a name. For this is what I said at the beginning, that oftentimes we think something, and are not able to express [it]: since not even the word God is a name of substance, nor is it at all possible to find a name of that Substance.

And what marvel, if it be so in respect of God, since not even in respect of an Angel, could one find a name expressive of his substance? Perhaps too, neither in respect of the soul. For this name [soul] does not seem to me to be significative of the substance thereof, but of breathing. For one may see that the same [thing] is called both Soul and Heart and Mind: for, says he, Create in me a clean heart, O God Psalm 51:10, and one may often see that it [the soul] is called spirit.

And upholding all things by the word of His power. Tell me, God said (it is written), Let there be light Genesis 1:3: the Father, says one, commanded, and the Son obeyed? But behold here He also [the Son] acts by word. For (says he), And upholding all things -- that is, governing; He holds together what would fall to pieces; For, to hold the world together, is no less than to make it, but even greater (if one must say a strange thing). For the one is to bring forward something out of things which are not: but the other, when things which have been made are about to fill back into non-existence, to hold and fasten them together, utterly at variance as they are with each other: this is indeed great and wonderful, and a certain proof of exceeding power.

Then showing the easiness, he said, upholding: (he did not say, governing, from the figure of those who simply with their finger move anything, and cause it to go round.) Here he shows both the mass of the creation to be great, and that this greatness is nothing to Him. Then again he shows the freedom from the labor, saying, By the word of His power. Well said he, By the word. For since, with us, a word is accounted to be a bare thing, he shows that it is not bare with God. But, how He upholds by the word, he has not further added: for neither is it possible to know. Then he added concerning His majesty: for thus John also did: having said that He is God John 1:1, he brought in the handiwork of the Creation. For the same thing which the one indirectly expressed, saying, In the beginning was the Word, and All things were made by Him John 1:3, this did the other also openly declare by the Word, and by saying by whom also He made the worlds. For thus he shows Him to be both a Creator, and before all ages. What then? When the prophet says, concerning the Father, You are from everlasting and to everlasting Psalm 90:2, and concerning the Son, that He is before all ages, and the maker of all things -- what can they say? Nay rather, when the very thing which was spoken of the Father -- He which was before the worlds, -- this one may see spoken of the Son also? And that which one says, He was life John 1:4, pointing out the preservation of the creation, that Himself is the Life of all things -- so also says this other, and upholding all things by the word of His power: not as the Greeks who defraud Him, as much as in them lies, both of Creation itself, and of Providence, shutting up His power, to reach only as far as to the Moon.

By Himself (says he) having purged our sins. Having spoken concerning those marvelous and great matters, which are most above us, he proceeds to speak also afterwards concerning His care for men. For indeed the former expression, and upholding all things, also was universal: nevertheless this is far greater, for it also is universal: for, for His part, all men believed. As John also, having said, He was life, and so pointed out His providence, says again, and He was light.

By Himself, says he, having purged our sins, He sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high. He here sets down two very great proofs of His care: first the purifying us from our sins, then the doing it by Himself. And in many places, you see him making very much of this -- not only of our reconciliation with God, but also of this being accomplished through the Son. For the gift being truly great, was made even greater by the fact that it was through the Son.

For in saying, He sat on the right hand, and, having by Himself purged our sins,-- though he had put us in mind of the Cross, he quickly added the mention of the resurrection and ascension. And see his unspeakable wisdom: he said not, He was commanded to sit down, but He sat down. Then again, lest you should think that He stands, he subjoins, For to which of the angels said He at any time, Sit on My right hand.

He sat (says he) on the right hand of the Majesty on high. What is this on high? Does he enclose God in place? Away with such a thought! But just as, when he says, on the right hand, he did not describe Him as having figure, but showed His equal dignity with the Father; so, in saying on high, he did not enclose Him there, but expressed the being higher than all things, and having ascended up above all things. That is, He attained even unto the very throne of the Father: as therefore the Father is on high, so also is He. For the sitting together implies nothing else than equal dignity. But if they say, that He said, Sit, we may ask them, What then? Did He speak to Him standing? Moreover, he said not that He commanded, not that He enjoined, but that He said: for no other reason, than that you might not think Him without origin and without cause. For that this is why he said it, is evident from the place of His sitting. For had he intended to signify inferiority, he would not have said, on the right hand, but on the left hand.

Hebrews 1:4

Being made, says he, so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. The being made, here, is instead of being shown forth, as one may say. Then also from what does he reason confidently? From the Name. Do you see that the name Son is wont to declare true relationship? And indeed if He were not a true Son (and true is nothing else than of Him), how does he reason confidently from this? For if He be Son only by grace, He not only is not more excellent than the angels, but is even less than they. How? Because righteous men too were called sons; and the name son, if it be not a genuine son, does not avail to show the excellency. When too he would point out that there is a certain difference between creatures and their maker, hear what he says:

Hebrews 1:5

For to which of the Angels said He at any time, You are My Son, this day have I begotten You. And again, I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son? For these things indeed are spoken with reference also to the flesh: I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son -- while this, You are My Son, this day have I begotten You, expresses nothing else than from [the time] that God is. For as He is said to be, from the time present (for this befits Him more than any other), so also the [word] Today seems to me to be spoken here with reference to the flesh. For when He has taken hold of it, thenceforth he speaks out all boldly. For indeed the flesh partakes of the high things, just as the Godhead of the lowly. For He who disdained not to become man, and did not decline the reality, how should He have declined the expressions?

Seeing then that we know these things, let us be ashamed of nothing, nor have any high thoughts. For if He Himself being God and Lord and Son of God, did not decline to take the form of a slave, much more

ought we to do all things, though they be lowly. For tell me, O man, whence have you high thoughts? From things of this life? But these or ever they appear, run by. Or, from things spiritual? Nay, this is itself one spiritual excellency -- to have no high thoughts.

Wherefore then do you cherish high thoughts? Because you go on aright? Hear Christ saying, When you have done all things, say, we are unprofitable servants, for we have done that which was our duty to do. Luke 17:10

Or because of your wealth have you high thoughts? Do you not see those before you, how they departed naked and desolate? Did we not come naked into life, and naked also shall depart? Who has high thoughts on having what is another's? For they who will use it to their own enjoyment alone, are deprived of it how ever unwillingly, often before death, and at death certainly. But (says one) while we live we use them as we will. First of all, one does not lightly see any man using what he has as he will. Next, if a man do even use things as he will, neither is this a great matter: for the present time is short compared with the ages without end. Are you high-minded, O man, because you are rich? On what account? For what cause? For this befalls also robbers, and thieves, and man-slayers, and effeminate, and whoremongers, and all sorts of wicked men. Wherefore then are you high-minded? Since if you have made meet use of it, you must not be high-minded, lest you profane the commandment: but if unmeet, by this indeed [it has come to pass that] you have become a slave of money, and goods, and art overcome by them. For tell me, if any man sick of a fever should drink much water, which for a short space indeed quenches his thirst, but afterwards kindles the flame, ought he to be high-minded? And what, if any man have many cares without cause, ought he therefore to be high-minded? Tell me, wherefore? Because you have many masters? Because you have ten thousand cares? Because many will flatter you? [Surely not.] For you are even their slave. And to prove that to you, hear plainly. The other affections which are within us, are in some cases useful. For instance, Anger is often useful. For (says he) unjust wrath shall not be innocent Sirach 1:22: wherefore it is possible for one to be justly in wrath. And again, He that is angry with his brother without cause, shall be in danger of hell. Matthew 5:22 Again for instance, emulation, desire, [are useful]: the one when it has reference to the procreation of children, the other when he directs his emulation to excellent things. As Paul also says, It is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing and, Covet earnestly the best gifts. 1 Corinthians 12:31 Both therefore are useful: but an insolent spirit is in no case good, but is always unprofitable and hurtful.

However, if a man must be proud, [let it be] for poverty, not for wealth. Wherefore? Because he who can live upon a little, is far greater and better than he who cannot. For tell me, supposing certain persons called to the Imperial City, if some of them should need neither beasts, nor slaves, nor umbrellas, nor lodging-places, nor sandals, nor vessels, but it should suffice them to have bread, and to take water from the wells -- while others of them should say, unless ye give us conveyances, and a soft bed, we cannot come; unless also we have many followers, unless we may be allowed continually to rest ourselves, we cannot come, nor unless we have the use of beasts, unless too we may travel but a small portion of the day -- and we have need of many other things also: whom should we admire? Those or these? Plainly, these who require nothing. So also here: some need many things for the journey through this life; others, nothing. So that it would be more fitting to be proud, for poverty if it were fitting at all.

But the poor man, they say, is contemptible. Not he, but those who despise him. For why do not I despise those who know not how to admire what they ought? Why, if a person be a painter, he will laugh to scorn all who jeer at him, so long as they are uninstructed; nor does he regard the things which they say, but is content with his own testimony. And shall we depend on the opinion of the many? Therefore, we are

worthy of contempt when men despise us for our poverty, and we do not despise them nor call them miserable.

And I say not how many sins are produced by wealth, and how many good things by poverty. But rather, neither wealth nor poverty is excellent in itself, but through those who use it. The Christian shines out in poverty rather than in riches. How? He will be less arrogant, more sober-minded, graver, more equitable, more considerate: but he that is in wealth, has many impediments to these things. Let us see then what the rich man does, or rather, he who uses his wealth amiss. Such an one practices rapine, fraud, violence. Men's unseemly loves, unholy unions, witchcrafts, poisonings, all their other horrors -- will you not find them produced by wealth? Do you see, that in poverty rather than in wealth the pursuit of virtue is less laborious? For do not, I beseech you, think that because rich men do not suffer punishment here, neither do they sin. Since if it were easy for a rich man to suffer punishment, you would surely have found the prisons filled with them. But among its other evils, wealth has this also, that he who possesses it, transgressing in evil with impunity, will never be stayed from doing so, but will receive wounds without remedies, and no man will put a bridle on him.

And if a man choose, he will find that poverty affords us more resources even for pleasure. How? Because it is freed from cares, hatred, fighting, contention, strife, from evils out of number.

Therefore let us not follow after wealth, nor be forever envying those who possess much. But let those of us who have wealth, use it aright; and those who have not, let us not grieve for this, but give thanks for all things unto God, because He enables us to receive with little labor the same reward with the rich, or even (if we will) a greater: and from small means we shall have great gains. For so he that brought the two talents, was admired and honored equally with him who brought the five. Now why? Because he was entrusted with [but] two talents, yet he accomplished all that in him lay, and brought in what was entrusted to him, doubled. Why then are we eager to have much entrusted to us, when we may by a little reap the same fruits, or even greater? When the labor indeed is less, but the reward much more? For more easily will a poor man part with his own, than a rich man who has many and great possessions. What, know ye not, that the more things a man has, the more he sets his love upon? Therefore, lest this befall us, let us not seek after wealth, nor let us be impatient of poverty, nor make haste to be rich: and let those of us who have [riches] so use them as Paul commanded. They that have, says he, as though they had not, and they that use this world as not abusing it 1 Corinthians 7:29-31: that we may obtain the good things promised. And may it be granted to us all to obtain them, 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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