

Hebrews 2:16-3:6

by St. John Chrysostom

God's love for humanity is shown in His taking on human flesh, and we must hold fast to hope and persevere in the face of challenges and afflictions.

Topics: "Christology", "Atonement"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the great kindness of God towards humanity, emphasizing how Christ took on human flesh out of love and compassion, not for angels but for the seed of Abraham. He highlights the significance of Christ being made like His brethren in all things, including being born, growing, suffering, and dying, to show His care and willingness to become our brother. Chrysostom explains how Christ became a merciful and faithful High Priest to make reconciliation for the sins of the people, able to sympathize with human suffering and temptations. He encourages believers to endure tribulations and spiritual battles, to be armed with truth, righteousness, salvation, and faith, in order to overcome the war of desires and passions, and ultimately receive the crown in Christ Jesus.

Transcript

For verily He takes not hold of Angels, but of the seed of Abraham He takes hold. Wherefore in all things it behooved Him to be made like His brethren.

1. Paul wishing to show the great kindness of God towards man, and the Love which He had for the human race, after saying: Forasmuch then as the children were partakers of blood and flesh, He also Himself likewise took part of the same Hebrews 2:14-- follows up the subject in this passage. For do not regard lightly what is spoken, nor think this merely a slight [matter], His taking on Him our flesh. He granted not this to Angels; For verily He takes not hold of Angels, but of the seed of Abraham. What is it that he says? He took not on Him an Angel's nature, but man's. But what is He takes hold of? He did not (he means) grasp that nature, which belongs to Angels, but ours. But why did he not say, He took on Him, but used this expression, He takes hold of? It is derived from the figure of persons pursuing those who turn away from them, and doing everything to overtake them as they flee, and to take hold of them as they are bounding away. For when human nature was fleeing from Him, and fleeing far away for we were far off-- Ephesians 2:13, He pursued after and overtook us. He showed that He has done this only out of kindness, and love, and tender care. As then when he says, Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation Hebrews 1:14-- he shows His extreme interest in behalf of human nature, and that God makes great account of it, so also in this place he sets it forth much more

by a comparison, for he says, He takes not hold of angels. For in very deed it is a great and a wonderful thing, and full of amazement that our flesh should sit on high, and be adored by Angels and Archangels, by the Cherubim and the Seraphim. For myself having oftentimes thought upon this, I am amazed at it, and imagine to myself great things concerning the human race. For I see that the introductions are great and splendid, and that God has great zeal on behalf of our nature.

Moreover he said not of men (simply) He takes hold, but wishing to exalt them [the Hebrews] and to show that their race is great and honorable, he says, but of the seed of Abraham He takes hold.

Wherefore it behooved [Him] in all things to be made like His brethren. What is this, in all things? He was born (he means), was brought up, grew, suffered all things necessary, at last He died. This is, in all things to be made like His brethren. For after he had discoursed much concerning His majesty and the glory on high, he then begins concerning the dispensation. And consider with how great power [he does this]. How he represents Him as having great zeal to be made like us: which was a sign of much care. For having said above, Inasmuch then as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself in like manner took part of the same; in this place also he says, in all things to be made like His brethren. Which is all but saying, He that is so great, He that is the brightness of His glory, He that is the express image of His person, He that made the worlds, He that sits on the right hand of the Father, He was willing and earnest to become our brother in all things, and for this cause did He leave the angels and the other powers, and come down to us, and took hold of us, and wrought innumerable good things. He destroyed Death, He cast out the devil from his tyranny, He freed us from bondage: not by brotherhood alone did He honor us, but also in other ways beyond number. For He was willing also to become our High Priest with the Father: for he adds,

2. That He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God. For this cause (he means) He took on Him our flesh, only for Love to man, that He might have mercy upon us. For neither is there any other cause of the economy, but this alone. For He saw us, cast on the ground, perishing, tyrannized over by Death, and He had compassion on us. To make reconciliation, he says, for the sins of the people. That He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest.

What is faithful? True, able. For the Son is a faithful High Priest, able to deliver from their sins those whose High Priest He is. In order then that He might offer a sacrifice able to purify us, for this cause He has become man.

Accordingly he added, in things pertaining to God,-- that is, for the sake of things in relation to God. We had become altogether enemies to God, (he would say) condemned, degraded, there was none who should offer sacrifice for us. He saw us in this condition, and had compassion on us, not appointing a High Priest for us, but Himself becoming a High Priest. In what sense He was faithful, he added [viz.], to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.

Hebrews 2:18

For, he says, in that He has suffered Himself being tempted, He is able to succor them that are tempted. This is altogether low and mean, and unworthy of God. For in that He has suffered Himself, he says. It is of Him who was made flesh that he here speaks, and it was said for the full assurance of the hearers, and on account of their weakness. That is (he would say) He went through the very experience of the things which we have suffered; now He is not ignorant of our sufferings; not only does He know them as God, but as man also He has known them, by the trial wherewith He was tried; He suffered much, He knows how to

sympathize. And yet God is incapable of suffering: but he describes here what belongs to the Incarnation, as if he had said, Even the very flesh of Christ suffered many terrible things. He knows what tribulation is; He knows what temptation is, not less than we who have suffered, for He Himself also has suffered.

(What then is this, He is able to succor them that are tempted? It is as if one should say, He will stretch forth His hand with great eagerness, He will be sympathizing.)

3. Since they wished for something great, and to have an advantage over the [converts] from the Gentiles, he shows that they have an advantage in this while he did not hurt those from the Gentiles at all. In what respect now is this? Because of them is the salvation, because He took hold of them first, because from that race He assumed flesh. For, he says, He takes not hold of angels, but of the seed of Abraham He takes hold. Hereby he both gives honor to the Patriarch, and shows also what the seed of Abraham is. He reminds them of the promise made to him, saying, To you and to your seed will I give this land Genesis 13:15; showing by the very least thing, the nearness [of the relationship] in that they were all of one. But that nearness was not great: [so] he comes back to this, and thenceforward dwells upon the dispensation which was after the flesh, and says, Even the mere willing to become man was a proof of great care and love; but now it is not this alone, but there are also the undying benefits which are bestowed on us through Him, for, he says, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.

Why said he not, of the world, instead of the people? For He bare away the sins of all. Because thus far his discourse was concerning them [the Hebrews]. Since the Angel also said to Joseph, You shall call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people. Matthew 1:21 For this too ought to have taken place first, and for this purpose He came, to save them and then through them the rest, although the contrary came to pass. This also the Apostles said at the first, To you [God] having raised up His Son, sent [Him] to bless you Acts 3:26: and again, To you was the word of this Salvation sent. Acts 13:26 Here he shows the noble birth of the Jews, in saying, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For a while he speaks in this way. For that it is He who forgives the sins of all men, He declared both in the case of the paralytic, saying, Your sins are forgiven Mark 2:5; and also in that of Baptism: for He says to the disciples, Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Matthew 28:19

4. But when Paul has once taken in hand the flesh, he proceeds to utter all the lowly things, without any fear: for see what he says next:

Hebrews 3:1-2

Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him that appointed [or made] Him, as also Moses [was faithful] in all His house.

Being about to place Him before Moses in comparison, he led his discourse to the law of the high-priesthood; for they all had a high esteem for Moses: moreover, he is already beforehand casting down the seeds of the superiority. Therefore he begins from the flesh, and goes up to the Godhead, where there was no longer any comparison. He began from the flesh [from His Human nature], by assuming for a time the equality, and says, as also Moses in all His house: nor does he at first show His superiority lest the hearer should start away, and straightway stop his ears. For although they were believers, yet nevertheless they still had strong feeling of conscience as to Moses. Who was faithful, he says, to Him that made Him-- made [Him] what? Apostle and High Priest. He is not speaking at all in this place of His Essence, nor of His Godhead; but so far concerning human dignities.

As also Moses in all His house, that is, either among the people, or in the temple. But here he uses the expression in His house, just as one might say, concerning those in the household; even as some guardian and steward of a household, so was Moses to the people. For that by house he means the people, he added, whose house we are Hebrews 3:6; that is, we are in His creation. Then [comes] the superiority.

Hebrews 3:3-4

For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, (Again [he is speaking] of the Flesh), inasmuch as he who has built [the house] has more honor than the house; [Moses] himself also (he means) was of the house. (Moreover he did not say, For this one was a servant, but the Other a master, but he covertly intimated it.) If the people were the house and he was of the people, then he certainly was of the household. For so also we are accustomed to say, such an one is of such an one's house. For here he is speaking of a house, not of the temple, for the temple was not constructed by God, but by men. But He that made him [is] God. Moses he means. And see how he covertly shows the superiority. Faithful, he says, in all His house, being himself also of the house, that is, of the people. The builder has more honor than the house, yet he did not say the artificer has more honor than his works, but he that has built the house, than the house. Hebrews 3:4 But He that built all things is God. You see that he is speaking not about the temple but about the whole people.

Hebrews 3:5

And Moses verily [was] faithful in all His house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken. See also another point of superiority, that [which is derived] from the Son and the servants. You see again that by the appellation of The Son, he intimates true relationship. Hebrews 3:6 But Christ as a Son over His own house. Perceivest thou how he separates the thing made and the maker, the servant and the son? Moreover He indeed enters into His Father's property as a master, but the other as a servant.

Whose [i.e.] God's house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end. Here again he encourages them to press forward nobly, and not to fall: for we shall be the house of God (he says), as Moses was, if we hold fast our confidence and our rejoicing firm unto the end. He however (he would say) that is distressed in his trials, and who falls, does not glory: he that is ashamed, he that hides himself, has no confidence, he that is perplexed does not glory.

And then he also commends them, saying, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end, implying that they had even made a beginning; but that there is need of the end, and not simply to stand, but to have their hope firm in full assurance of faith, without being shaken by their trials.

5. And be not astonished, that the [words] Himself being tempted Hebrews 2:18 are spoken more after the manner of men. For if the Scripture says of the Father, who was not made flesh, The Lord looked down from heaven, and beheld all the sons of men Psalm 14:2, that is, accurately acquainted Himself with all things; and again, I will go down, and see whether they do altogether according to the cry of them Genesis 18:21; and again, God cannot endure the evil ways of men Genesis 6:5?, the divine Scripture shows forth the greatness of His wrath: much more, who even suffered in the flesh, these things are said of Christ. For since many men consider experience the most reliable means of knowledge, he wishes to show that He that has suffered knows what human nature suffers.

Whence holy brethren (he says whence instead of for this cause), partakers of an heavenly calling -- (seek nothing here, if you have been called yonder -- yonder is the reward, yonder the recompense. What then?) Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him that appointed Him, as also Moses [was faithful] in all His house. (What is who was faithful to Him that appointed Him? it is, well disposed, protecting what belongs to Him, not allowing them to be lightly carried away, as also Moses in all His house) that is, know who your High Priest is, and what He is, and you will need no other consolation nor encouragement. Now he calls Him Apostle, on account of His having been sent, and high priest of our profession, that is of the Faith. This One also was entrusted with a people, as the other with the leadership of a people, but a greater one and upon higher grounds.

For a testimony of those things which shall be spoken. What do you mean? Does God receive the witness of man? Yes, certainly. For if He call to witness heaven and earth and hills (saying by the prophet, Hear, O heaven, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken Isaiah 1:2 -- and Hear ye ravines, foundations of the earth, for the Lord has a controversy with His people Micah 6:2), much more men; that is, that they may be witnesses, when themselves [the Jews] shameless.

Hebrews 3:6

But Christ as a Son. The one takes care of the property of others, but this One of His own. And the rejoicing of the hope. Well said he of the hope. For since the good things were all in hope, and yet we ought so to hold it fast, as even now to glory as for things which had already come to pass: for this cause he says, the rejoicing of the hope.

And adds, let us hold it firm unto the end. Romans 8:24 For by hope we are saved; if therefore we are saved by hope, and are waiting with patience Romans 8:25, let us not be grieved at present things, nor seek now those that have been promised afterwards; For (he says) hope which is seen is not hope. For since the good things are great, we cannot receive them here in this transitory life. With what object then did He even tell us of them beforehand, when He was not about to give them here? In order that by the promise He might refresh our souls, that by the engagement He might strengthen our zeal, that He might anoint [preparing us for our contests] and stir up our mind. For this cause then all these things were done.

6. Let us not then be troubled, let no man be troubled, when he sees the wicked prospering. The recompense is not here, either of wickedness or of virtue; and if in any instance there be either of wickedness or of virtue, yet is it not according to desert, but merely as it were a taste of the judgment, that they who believe not the resurrection may yet even by things that happen here be brought to their senses. When then we see a wicked man rich, let us not be cast down; when we see a good man suffering, let us not be troubled. For yonder are the crowns, yonder the punishments.

Yea and in another point of view, it is not possible either that a bad man should be altogether bad, but he may have some good things also: nor again that a good man should be altogether good, but he may also have some sins. When therefore the wicked man prospers, it is for evil on his own head, that having here received the reward of those few good things, he may hereafter be utterly punished yonder; for this cause does he receive his recompense in this life. And happy is he most of all who is punished here, that having put away all his sins, he may depart approved, and pure, and without having to be called to account. And this Paul teaches us when he says, For this cause many [are] weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. 1 Corinthians 11:30 And again, I have delivered such an one to Satan. 1 Corinthians 5:5 And the prophet says, for she has received of the Lord's hand her sins double Isaiah 40:2; and again David,

Behold mine enemies that they are multiplied above the hairs of my head and [with] an unjust hatred have they hated me: and forgive Thou all my sins. Psalm 25:19 And again another: O Lord, our God, give peace unto us; for You have rendered all things to us again. Isaiah 26:12

These however are [the words] of one showing that good men receive here the punishments of their sins. But where are the wicked [mentioned] who receive their good things here, and there are utterly punished? Hear Abraham saying to the rich man, You received good things, and Lazarus evil things. Luke 16:25 What good things? For in this place by saying you receive, and not thou had taken, he shows that it was according to what was due to him that each was treated, and that the one was in prosperity, and the other in adversity. And he says, Therefore he is comforted here (for you see him pure from sins) and you are tormented. Let us not then be perplexed when we see sinners well off here; but when we ourselves are afflicted, let us rejoice. For this very thing is paying off the penalty of sins.

7. Let us not then seek relaxation: for Christ promised tribulation to His disciples and Paul says, All Who will live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution. 2 Timothy 3:12 No noble-spirited wrestler, when in the lists, seeks for baths, and a table full of food and wine. This is not for a wrestler, but for a sluggard. For the wrestler contends with dust, with oil, with the heat of the sun's ray, with much sweat, with pressure and constraint. This is the time for contest and for fighting, therefore also for being wounded, and for being bloody and in pain. Hear what the blessed Paul says, So fight I, not as one that beats the air. 1 Corinthians 9:26 Let us consider that our whole life is in combats, and then we shall never seek rest, we shall never feel it strange when we are afflicted: no more than a boxer feels it strange, when he combats. There is another season for repose. By tribulation we must be made perfect.

And even if there be no persecution, nor tribulation, yet there are other afflictions which befall us every day. And if we do not bear these, we should scarcely endure those. There has no temptation taken you, it is said, but such as is common to man. 1 Corinthians 10:13 Let us then pray indeed to God that we may not come into temptation; but if we come into it, let us bear it nobly. For that indeed is the part of prudent men, not to throw themselves upon dangers; but this of noble men and true philosophers. Let us not then lightly cast ourselves upon [dangers], for that is rashness; nor yet, if led into them, and called by circumstances let us give in, for that is cowardice. But if indeed the Gospel call us, let us not refuse; but in a simple case, when there is no reason, nor need, nor necessity which calls us in the fear of God, let us not rush in. For this is mere display, and useless ambition. But should any of those things which are injurious to religion occur, then though it be necessary to endure ten thousand deaths, let us refuse nothing. Challenge not trials, when you find the things that concern godliness prosper as you desire. Why draw down needless dangers which bring no gain?

These things I say, because I wish you to observe the laws of Christ who commands us to pray that we enter not into temptation Matthew 26:41, and commands us to take up the cross and follow Him. Matthew 16:24 For these things are not contradictory, nay they are rather exceedingly in harmony. Do thou be so prepared as is a valiant soldier, be continually in your armor, sober, watchful, ever looking for the enemy: do not however breed wars, for this is not [the act] of a soldier but of a mover of sedition. But if on the other hand the trumpet of godliness call you, go forth immediately, and make no account of your life, and enter with great eagerness into the contests, break the phalanx of the adversaries, bruise the face of the devil, set up your trophy. If however godliness be in nowise harmed, and no one lay waste our doctrines (those I mean which relate to the soul), nor compel us to do anything displeasing to God, do not be officious.

The life of the Christian must be full of blood-sheddings; I say not in shedding that of others, but in readiness to shed one's own. Let us then pour out our own blood, when it is for Christ's sake, with as great readiness as one would pour out water (for the blood which flows about the body is water), and let us put off our flesh with as much good temper, as one even would a garment. And this shall we do, if we be not bound to riches, if not to houses, if not to affections, if we be detached from all things. For if they who live this life of [earthly] soldiers bid farewell to all things, and wherever war calls them there present themselves, and make journeys, and endure all things with ready mind; much more ought we, the soldiers of Christ, so to have prepared ourselves, and to set ourselves firm against the war of the passions.

8. There is no persecution now, and God grant there may never be: but there is another war, that of the desire of money, of envy, of the passions. Paul, describing this war, says, We wrestle not against flesh and blood. Ephesians 6:12 This war is ever at hand. Therefore he wishes us to stand ever armed. Because he wishes us to stand ever armed, he says, Stand, having girded yourselves about. Ephesians 6:14 Which itself also belongs to the time present, and expresses that we ought ever to be armed. For great is the war through the tongue, great that through the eyes; this then we must keep down -- great [too] is that of the lusts.

Therefore he begins at that point to arm the soldier of Christ: for stand, says he, having your loins girt about, and he added with truth. Ephesians 6:14 Why with truth? Because lust is a mockery and a lie: wherefore the prophet says, My loins are filled with mockings. Psalm 38:7 The thing is not pleasure, but a shadow of pleasure. Having your loins, he says, girt about with truth; that is, with true pleasure, with temperance, with orderly behavior. For this cause he gives this advice, knowing the unreasonableness of sin, and wishing that all our members should be hedged round; for unjust anger it is said, shall not be guiltless. Sirach 1:22

Moreover he wishes us to have around us a breastplate and a buckler. For desire is a wild beast which easily springs forth, and we shall have need of walls and fences innumerable, to overcome, and to restrain it. And for this cause God has built this part [of our body] especially with bones, as with a kind of stones, placing around it a support, so that [desire] might not at any time, having broken or cut through, easily injure the whole man. For it is a fire (it is said) and a great tempest, and no other part of the body could endure this violence. And the sons of the physicians too say that for this cause the lungs have been spread under the heart, so that the heart being itself [put] into something soft and tender, by beating as it were into a sort of sponge, may continually be rested, and not [by striking] against the resisting and hard sternum, receive hurt through the violence of its beatings. We have need therefore of a strong breastplate, so as to keep this wild beast always quiet.

We have need also of an helmet; for since the reasoning faculty is there, and from this it is possible for us either to be saved, when what is right is done, or it is possible for us to be ruined -- therefore he says, the helmet of salvation. Ephesians 6:17 For the brain is indeed by nature tender, and therefore is covered above with the skull, as with a kind of shell. And it is to us the cause of all things both good and evil, knowing what is fitting, or what is not so. Yea and our feet too and our hands need armor, not these hands, nor these feet, but as before those of the soul-- the former by being employed about what is right, the latter, that they may walk where they ought. Thus then let us thoroughly arm ourselves, and we shall be able to overcome our enemies, and to wreath ourselves with the crown in Christ Jesus our Lord, with whom to the Father together with the Holy Ghost be glory, might, honor, now and for ever and world without end. Amen.

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