

Homily 10 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

The Apostles' boldness and conviction in the face of persecution demonstrate the power of God and the importance of standing firm in the face of adversity.

Scripture: Acts 4:2-22

Topics: "Apostolic Courage", "Christian Persecution"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the boldness and faith of the Apostles Peter and John as they face persecution for preaching about Jesus' resurrection and performing miracles. Despite threats and imprisonment, the Apostles fearlessly proclaim the Gospel, emphasizing that salvation is found only in Jesus Christ. The religious leaders marvel at their courage, recognizing that they had been with Jesus. The Apostles' unwavering commitment to God's truth and their refusal to be silenced by human authority serve as a powerful example of faith and obedience.

Transcript

Acts IV. 1

And as they spoke unto the people, there came unto them the priests, and the captain of the temple.

Ere yet they had time to take breath after their first trials, straightway they enter into others. And observe how the events are disposed. First, they were all mocked together; this was no small trial: secondly, they enter into dangers. And these two things do not take place in immediate succession; but when first the Apostles have won admiration by their two discourses, and after that have performed a notable miracle, thereupon it is that, after they are waxen bold, through God's disposal, they enter the lists. But I wish you to consider, how those same persons, who in the case of Christ must need look out for one to deliver Him up to them, now with their own hands arrest the Apostles, having become more audacious and more impudent since the Crucifixion. In truth, sin, while it is yet struggling to the birth, is attended with some sense of shame; but when once fully born, it makes those more shameless who practise it. And the captain of the temple, it is said. The object again was to attach a public criminality to what was doing, and not to prosecute it as the act of private individuals: such in fact was constantly their plan of proceeding.

Being grieved that they taught the people. Acts 4:2 Not merely because they taught, but because they declared, not alone that Christ Himself was risen from the dead, but moreover, that we through Him do rise again. Because they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection of the dead. So

mighty was His Resurrection, that to others also He is the cause of a resurrection. And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day; for it was now eventide. Acts 4:3 What impudence! They feared not the multitude; for this also the captain of the temple was with them: they had their hands still reeking with the blood of the former victim. For it was now eventide, it is said. It was with the wish to abate their spirit that those men did this, and guarded them; but the delay only served to make the Apostles more intrepid. And consider who these are who are arrested. They are the chiefs of the Apostles, who are now become a pattern to the rest, that they should no longer crave each other's support, nor want to be together. Howbeit, many having heard the word, believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand. Acts 4:4 How was this? Did they see them in honor? Did they not behold them put in bonds? How then did they believe? Do you see the evident efficacy? And yet even those that believed already might well have become weaker. But no, it is no longer so: for Peter's sermon had laid the seed deep into them, and had taken a hold upon their understandings. Therefore were [their enemies] incensed, that they did not fear them, that they made no account of their present troubles. For, say they, if He that was crucified effects such great things, and makes the lame to walk, we fear not these men either. This again is of God's ordering. For those who now believe were more numerous than the former. Therefore it was that in their presence they bound the Apostles, to make them also more fearful. But the reverse took place. And they examine them not before the people, but privately, that the hearers may not profit by their boldness.

And it came to pass on the morrow, that their rulers, and elders, and scribes, and Annas the High Priest, and Caiaphas, and John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the kindred of the High Priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. (v. 5-6.) For now along with the other evils (of the times), the Law was no longer observed. And again they set off the business with the form of a tribunal, to constitute them guilty by their iniquitous sentence. And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?

Acts 4:7 And yet they knew it well; for it was because they were grieved that they preached through Jesus the resurrection that they arrested them. Then for what purpose do they question them? They expected the numbers present would make them recant, and thought by this means to have put all right again. Observe then what they say: And by what name have ye done this? Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said to them. Acts 4:8 And now, I pray you, call to mind Christ's saying; When they deliver you up unto the synagogues, take ye no thought how or what thing you shall speak; for it is the Spirit of your Father which speaks in you.

Luke 12:11-14 So that it was a mighty Power they enjoyed. What then says Peter? You rulers of the people, and elders of Israel. Mark the Christian wisdom of the man; how full of confidence it is: he utters not a word of insult, but says with respect, You rulers of the people, and elders of Israel, if we be this day called to account of the good deed done to the impotent man. He takes them in hand right valiantly; by the opening of his speech he exposes them, and reminds them of the former things: that it is for a work of beneficence they are calling them to account.

As if he had said, In all fairness we ought to have been crowned for this deed, and proclaimed benefactors; but since we are even put upon our trial for a good deed done to an impotent man, not a rich man, not powerful, not noble -- and yet who would feel envy in a case like this? It is a most forcible (■ παγγελια, al. ■ παγγελ■α) way of putting the case; and he shows that they are piercing their own selves:-- By what means this man is made whole: be it known unto you all, and to all the people Israel; that by the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth:-- this is what would vex them most.

For this was that which Christ had told the disciples, What ye hear in the ear that preach ye upon the housetops.-- That in the name of Jesus Christ, he says, of Nazareth, Whom you crucified, Whom God raised from the dead, even by Him does this man stand here before you whole. Acts 4:10. Matthew 10:27 Think not, he says that we conceal the country, or the nature of the death. Whom you crucified, Whom God raised from the dead, even by Him does this man stand before you whole.

Again the death, again the resurrection. This is the stone, he says, which was set at nought of you builders, which has become the head of the corner. Acts 4:11 He reminds them also of a saying which was enough to frighten them. For it had been said, Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. Matthew 21:44-- Neither is there salvation in any other, Acts 4:12 Peter says. What wounds, think you, must these words inflict on them!

For there is none other name, he continues, under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved. Here he utters also lofty words. For when the object is, not to carry some point successfully, but only to show boldness he does not spare; for he was not afraid of striking too deep. Nor does he say simply, By another; but, Neither is there salvation in any other: that is, He is able to save us. In this way he subdued their threatening.

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus. Acts 4:13 The two unlearned men beat down with their rhetoric them and the chief priests. For it was not they that spoke, but the grace of the Spirit. And beholding the man which was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. Acts 4:14 Great was the boldness of the man; that even in the judgment-hall he has not left them. For had they said that the fact was not so, there was he to refute them. But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, What are we to do to these men? Acts 4:15 See the difficulty they are in, and how the fear of men again does everything. As in the case of Christ, they were not able (as the saying is) to undo what is done, nor to cast it into the shade, but for all their hindering, the Faith did but gain ground the more; so was it now. What shall we do? O the folly! To suppose that those who had tasted of the conflict, would now take fright at it: to expect, impotent as their efforts had proved in the beginning, to effect something new, after such a specimen of oratory as had been exhibited! The more they wished to hinder, the more the business grew upon their hands. But what say they? For that indeed a notable miracle has been done by them is manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it. But that it spread no further among the people, let us straightly threaten them, that they speak henceforth to no man in this name. And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all, nor teach, in the name of Jesus. Acts 4:16-18 See what effrontery is shown by these, and what greatness of mind by the Apostles. But Peter and John answered and said to them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding nothing how they might punish them, because of the people. Acts 4:19-21 The miracles shut their mouths: they would not so much as let them finish their speech, but cut them short in the middle, most insolently. For all men glorified God for that which was done. For the man was above forty years old, on whom this miracle of healing was showed. Acts 4:22 But let us look over what has been said from the beginning.

And as they spoke unto the people, etc. Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection of the dead. (Recapitulation, v. 1, 2.) So then at first they did all for the sake of man's opinion (or glory): but now another motive was added: that they should not be thought guilty of

murder, as they said subsequently, Do ye wish to bring this man's blood on us? Acts 5:28 O the folly! Persuaded that He was risen, and having received this proof of it, they expected that He Whom death could not hold, could be cast into the shade by their machinations! What can match the folly of this! Such is the nature of wickedness: it has no eyes for anything, but on all occasions it is thrown into perturbation. Finding themselves overborne, they felt like persons who have been outwitted: as is the case with people who have been forestalled and made a sport of in some matter. And yet they everywhere affirmed that it was God that raised Him: but it was in the Name of Jesus that they spoke; showing that Jesus was risen. Through Jesus, the resurrection of the dead: for they themselves also held a resurrection: a cold and puerile doctrine, indeed, but still they held it. Why this alone, was it not sufficient to induce them to do nothing to them -- I mean, that the disciples with such boldness bore themselves in the way they did? Say, wherefore, O Jew, do you disbelieve? You ought to have attended to the sign done, and to the words, not to the evil disposition of the many. By their teaching the people. For already they were in ill repute with them by reason of what they had done to Christ; so that they were rather increasing their own obloquy. And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold until the morrow; for it was now eventide. Acts 4:3 In the case of Christ, however, they did not so; but having taken Him at midnight, they immediately led him away, and made no delay, being exceedingly in fear of the multitude: whereas in the case of the Apostles here, they were bold. And they no more take them to Pilate, being ashamed and blushing at the thought of the former affair, lest they should also be taken to task for that.

And it came to pass on the morrow, that their rulers, and elders, and scribes were gathered together at Jerusalem. Acts 4:5 Again in Jerusalem: and there it is that men's blood is poured out; no reverence for their city either; And Annas, and Caiaphas, etc. Acts 4:6 And Annas, it says, and Caiaphas. His maid-servant it was that questioned Peter, and he could not bear it: in his house it was that Peter denied, when Another was in bonds there: but now, when he has come into the midst of them all, see how he speaks!

By what name have ye done this? Why do you not speak it, what it is, but keepest that out of sight? By what name have ye done this? Acts 4:7 And yet he affirmed, It was not we that did it. You rulers of the people, etc. Acts 4:8 Observe his wisdom: he does not say outright, In the Name of Jesus we did it, but how? In His Name this man -- He does not say, was made whole by us; but -- does stand here before you whole. And again, If we be examined concerning the good deed done to the impotent man.

Acts 4:9 He hits them hard, that they are always making a crime of such acts, finding fault with works of beneficence done to men: and he reminds them of their former doings, that they run to do murder, and not only so, but make a crime of doing good deeds. Do you observe too (in point of rhetoric) with what dignity they express themselves? Even in the use of words they were becoming expert by practice, and henceforth they were not to be beaten down. Be it known unto you all, etc.

Acts 4:10 Whereby he shows them that they rather do, in spite of themselves, preach Christ; themselves extol the doctrine, by their examining and questioning. O exceeding boldness -- Whom you crucified! Whom God raised up-- this is bolder still! Think not that we hide what there is to be ashamed of. He says this all but tauntingly: and not merely says it, but dwells upon the matter. This, says he, is the Stone which was set at naught by you builders; and then he goes on to teach them, saying in addition, Which is made the head of the corner Acts 4:11; that is to say, that the Stone is indeed approved!

Great was the boldness they now had, in consequence of the miracle. And when there was need to teach, observe how they speak and allege many prophecies; but when the point was to use boldness of speech,

then they only speak peremptorily. Thus Neither, says he, is there any other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. Acts 4:12 It is manifest to all, he says, because not to us alone was that Name given; he cites even themselves as witnesses. For, since they asked, In what name did ye it?

In Christ's, says he: there is none other name. How is it that you ask? On all hands this is palpable. For there exists not another name under heaven, whereby we must be saved. This is the language of a soul which has renounced (κατεργωκυ■ας) this present life. His exceeding outspokenness proves here, that when he speaks in lowly terms of Christ, he does it not of fear, but of wise forbearance (συγκαταβα■νων): but now that it was the fitting time, he speaks not in lowly terms: by this very thing intending to strike dismay into them.

Behold another miracle not less than the former. And beholding the boldness of Peter and John, etc. And they took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus. Acts 4:13 Not without a meaning has the Evangelist set down this passage; but in saying, they recognized them that they had been with Jesus, he means, in His Passion: for only these were [with Him] at that time, and then indeed they had seen them humble, dejected: and this it was that most surprised them: the greatness of the change.

For in fact Annas and Caiaphas with their company were there, and these then also had stood by Him, and their boldness now amazed them. And beholding the boldness. For not only their words; their very bearing showed it; that they should stand there so intrepidly to be tried in a cause like this, and with uttermost peril impending over them! Not only by their words, but by their gesture also, and their look and voice, and, in short, by everything about them, they manifested the boldness with which they confronted the people.

From the things they uttered, they marvelled, perhaps: that they were unlearned and common men: for one may be unlearned, yet not a common or private man, and a common man, yet not unlearned. Having perceived, it says. Whence? From what they said? Peter does not draw out long speeches, but then by his very manner and method (τ■ς ■παγγελ■ας κα■ τ■ς συνθ■κης) he declares his confidence. And they recognized them that they had been with Jesus. Which circumstance made them believe that it was from Him they had learned these things, and that they did all in the character of His disciples.

But not less than the voice of these, the miracle uttered a voice of its own: and that sign itself stopped their mouths. [And beholding the man, etc.] So that they would have been peremptory (■ π■σκηψαν) with them, if the man had not been with them. We cannot deny it. So that they would have denied it, if the thing had not been so: if the testimony had not been that of the people in general. But that it spread no further among the people. Acts 4:17 And yet it was palpable to all men!

But such is the nature of wickedness: everywhere it is shamed. Let us strictly threaten them. What do you say? Threaten? And expect ye to stop the preaching? And yet all beginnings are hard and trying. You slew the Master, and did not stop it: and now, if you threaten, do ye expect to turn us back? The imprisonment did not prevail with us to speak submissively, and shall you prevail? And they called them, and commanded them, etc. (v. 18, 19.) It had been much better for them to let them go.

And Peter and John answered and said to them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. When the terror was abated (for that command was tantamount to their being dismissed), then also the Apostles speak more mildly: so far were they from mere bravery: Whether it be right, says he: and We cannot [but speak]. Whether it be right in the sight of God to obey you rather

than God. Acts 4:20 Here [by God] they mean Christ, for he it was that commanded them.

And once more they confirm the fact of His Resurrection. For we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard: so that we are witnesses who have a right to be believed. So when they had further threatened them. Acts 4:21 Again they threatened in vain. They let them go, finding nothing how they might punish them, because of the people: for all men glorified God for that which was done. So then the people glorified God, but these endeavored to destroy them: such fighters against God were they! Whereby they made them more conspicuous and illustrious. For My strength, it is said, is made perfect in weakness. 2 Corinthians 12:9

Already these as martyrs have borne testimony: set in the battle against all, they said, We cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard. If the things we speak be false, reprehend them; if true, why do you hinder? Such is philosophy! Those, in perplexity, these in gladness: those covered with exceeding shame, these doing all with boldness: those in fear, these in confidence. For who, I would ask, were the frightened? Those who said, That it spread no further among people, or these who said, we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard? And these had a delight, a freedom of speech, a joy surpassing all; those a despondency, a shame, a fear; for they feared the people. But these were not afraid of those; on the contrary, while these spoke what they would, those did not what they would. Which were in chains and dangers? Was it not these last?

Let us then hold fast to virtue; let not these words end only in delight, and in a certain elevation of the spirits. This is not the theatre, for singers (κίθαρῶν), and tragedians, and musicians (κίθαριστῶν), where the fruit consists only in the enjoyment and where the enjoyment itself passes with the passing day. Nay, would that it were enjoyment alone, and not mischief also with the enjoyment! But so it is: each man carries home with him much of what he has witnessed there, sticking to him like the infection of a plague: and one indeed, of the younger sort, having culled such snatches of song here and there of those satanic plays, as he could fix in his memory, goes singing them about the house: while another, a senior, and forsooth too staid for such levity, does not this indeed, but what is there spoken, both the preachments and the very words, he remembers it all; and another again, some filthy and absurd ditty.

From this place you depart, taking nothing with you.-- We have laid down a law -- nay, not we: God forbid! For it is said, Call no man your master upon the earth Matthew 23:8; Christ has laid down a law that none should swear. Now, say, what has been done with regard to this law? For I will not cease speaking of it; lest, as the Apostle says, if I come again, I must not spare. 2 Corinthians 13:2 I ask then, have you laid the matter to heart? Have you thought of it seriously?

Have you been in earnest about it, or must we again take up the same subject? Nay, rather, whether you have or not, we will resume it, that you may think seriously about it, or, if you have laid it to heart, may again do this the more surely, and exhort others also. With what then, I pray you, with what shall we begin? Shall it be with the Old Testament? For indeed this also is to our shame, that the precepts of the Law, which we ought to surpass, we do not even thus observe!

For we ought not to be hearing such matters as these: these are precepts adapted to the poor Jewish level (τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἐτελευτάς): we ought to be hearing those counsels of perfection; Cast away your property, stand courageously, and give up your life in behalf of the Gospel, scorn all the goods of earth, have nothing in common with this present life; if any wrong you, do him good; if any defraud you, bless him; if any revile you, show him honor; be above everything. (S. Ambros. de Off. i. 2.)

These and such as these are what we ought to be hearing. But here are we discoursing about swearing; and our case is just the same as if, when a person ought to be a philosopher, one should take him away from the great masters, and set him to spell syllables letter by letter! Just think now what a disgrace it would be for a man having a flowing beard, and with staff in hand, and cope on shoulders, to go to school with children, and be set the same tasks with them: would it not be above measure ridiculous?

And yet the ridicule which belongs to us is even greater. For not as the difference between philosophy and the spelling-lesson, so is that between the Jewish polity and ours: no indeed, but as the difference between angels and men. Say now, if one could fetch down an angel from heaven, and should bid him stand here and listen to our preaching, as one whose duty it is to conform himself thereto, would it not be shameful and preposterous? But if to be yet, like children, under teaching about these things be ridiculous; what must it be, not even to attend to these things: how great the condemnation, how great the shame! To be Christians still, and to have to learn that it is not right to swear! However, let us put up with that, lest we incur even worse ridicule.

Well, then, let us speak to you today from the Old Testament. What does it tell us? Accustom not your mouth to swearing; neither use yourself to the naming of the Holy One. And why? For as a servant that is continually beaten shall not be without a blue mark, so he that swears. Sirach 23:10 See the discernment of this wise man. He did not say, Accustom not to swearing your mind, but your mouth; because being altogether an affair of the mouth, thus it is easily remedied. For at last it becomes a habit without intention; as for instance, there are many who entering the public baths, as soon as they have passed the threshold, cross Hom. in 1 Corinthians 11:7 themselves (σφραγίζονται).

This the hand has got to do, without any one's bidding, by force of habit. Again, at the lighting of a candle, often when the mind is intent on something else, the hand makes the sign. In the same way also the mouth, without concurrence of the mind, articulates the word, from mere habit, and the whole affair is in the tongue. Neither use yourself, he says, to the naming of the Holy One. For as a servant that is continually beaten shall not be without a blue mark, so he that swears.

He speaks not here of false oaths, but he cuts down all oaths, and to them also assigns their punishment. Why then, swearing is a sin. For such in truth is the soul; full of all these ulcers, all these scars. But you do not see them? Yes, this is the mischief of it; and yet you might see if you wished; for God has given you eyes. With eyes of this kind did the Prophet see, when he said, My wounds stink, and are corrupt, because of my foolishness. Psalm 38:5 We have despised God, we have hated that good Name, we have trodden Christ under foot, we have lost all reverence, none names the Name of God with honor.

Yet if you love any one, even at his name you start to your feet; but God you thus continually invoke, and make nothing of it. Call upon Him for the benefit of your enemy; call upon Him for the salvation of your own soul; then he will be present, then you will delight Him; whereas now you provoke Him to anger. Call upon Him as Stephen did; Lord, he said, lay not this sin to their charge. Acts 7:59 Call upon Him as did the wife of Elkanah, with tears and sobs, and prayers. 1 Samuel 1:10 I prevent you not, rather I earnestly exhort you to it.

Call upon him as Moses called upon Him, yea, cried, interceding for those who had driven him into banishment. For you to make mention at random of any person of consideration, is taken as an insult: and do you bandy God about in your talk, in season, out of season? I do not want to hinder you from keeping God always in your mind: nay, this I even desire and pray for, only that you should do this, so as to honor

Him. Great good would this have done us, if we had called upon God only when we ought, and for what we ought.

And why, I would ask, were such miracles wrought in the Apostles' times, and not in ours? And yet it is the same God, the same Name. But no, the case is not the same. For then they called upon Him only for those objects which I have mentioned; whereas we call upon Him not for these, but quite other purposes.-- If a man refuse to believe you, and that is why you swear, say to him, Believe me: however, if you will needs make oath, swear by yourself. I say this, not to set up a law against Christ's law; God forbid; for it is said.

Let your yea be yea, and your nay, nay Matthew 5:37: but by way of coming down to your present level, that I may more easily lead you to the practice of this commandment, and divert you from this tyrannical habit. How many who have done well in other respects, have been undone by these practices! Shall I tell you why it was permitted the ancients to take oaths? (for to take false oaths, was not permitted to them either.) Because they swore by idols. But are you not ashamed to rest in laws, by which they in their infirmity were led on to something better?

It is true, when I take a Gentile in hand, I do not immediately lay this injunction upon him, but in the first place I exhort him to know Christ; but if the believer, who has both learned Him and heard Him, must needs crave the same forbearance with the Gentile, what is the use, what the gain (of his Christianity?)-- But the habit is strong, and you cannot detach yourself from it? Well then, since the tyranny of habit is so great, transfer it into another channel. And how is this to be done?

You will ask. What I have said often, I say also now; let there be many monitors (λογιστα■), let there be many examiners and censors (■ ξεταστα■, δοκιμαστα■). Say, if you chance to put on your mantle inside out, you allow your servant to correct your mistake, and are ashamed to learn of him, although there is much to be ashamed of in this; and here when you are getting hurt to your soul, are you ashamed to be taught better by another? You suffer your menial to put your dress in order, and to fasten your shoes, and will you not endure him that would put your soul in order?

Let even your menial, your child, your wife, your friend, your kinsman, your neighbor, be your teachers on this point. For as when a wild beast is hunted down from all sides, it is impossible for it to escape; so he that has so many to watch him, so many to reprove him, who is liable to be struck at from all sides, cannot help being on his guard. The first day he will find it hard to put up with, and the second, and the third; but after that it will come easier, and, the fourth passed, there will not even be anything to do.

Make the experiment, if you doubt me; take it into consideration, I beseech you. It is not a trifling matter to be wrong in, nor yet to come right in; on both sides it is great for evil and for good. May the good be effected, through the grace and loving-mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost be glory, power, and honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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