

# Homily 11 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

*The Apostles' prayer and faith in God's power resulted in a community of believers living in unity and abundance.*

**Scripture:** Acts 4:23-24, Acts 4:27, Acts 4:30-36

**Topics:** "Early Christianity", "Holy Spirit"

## Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the unity and courage of the early Christians in Acts 4, emphasizing their unwavering faith in the face of adversity. The believers, after being released, gathered together and reported the threats they faced, seeking strength from God. Through prayer, they acknowledged God's sovereignty over all things and His power to fulfill His purposes. They prayed for boldness to speak the word of God and for signs and wonders to be done in the name of Jesus. The believers were filled with the Holy Spirit, enabling them to boldly proclaim the Gospel and share everything in common, demonstrating a profound unity and generosity.

## Transcript

Acts IV. 23

And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.

Not for their own glory did they tell the tale -- how should such be their motive?-- but what they displayed was the proofs therein exhibited of the grace of Christ. All that their adversaries had said, this they told; their own part, it is likely, they omitted: this made the hearers all the more courageous. What then? These again flee to the true Succor, to the Alliance invincible, and again, with one accord. And when they heard that, it is said, with one accord they lifted up their voice to God, and said: Acts 4:24 and with great earnestness, for it is no prayer made at random. Observe with what exquisite propriety their prayers are framed: thus, when they besought to be shown who was meet for the Apostleship, they said, You, Lord, which know the heart of all men, show: Acts 1:24 for it was a subject for Prescience there: but here, where the thing needed was that the mouths of their adversaries should be stopped, they speak of lordship; wherefore they begin thus: Lord, (Δ■σποτα) the God that made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: Who, by the Holy Ghost through the mouth of Your servant, David our father, said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ. Acts 4:24-26 It is to sue God, as one may

say upon His own covenants, that they thus produce this prophecy: and at the same time to comfort themselves with the thought, that in vain are all the imaginations of their foes. This then is what they say: Bring those words into accomplishment, and show that they imagine vain things.-- For of a truth, they proceed, there were gathered together in this city, against Your holy Child Jesus, (Ἰακώβου) Whom You have anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, for to do whatsoever Your hand and Your counsel determined before to be done. And now, Lord, behold their threatenings. Acts 4:27-29 Observe their largeness of mind (φιλοσοφῶν). These are not words of imprecation. In saying, their threatenings, they do not mean this or that thing specifically threatened, but only in general, the fact of their threatening, perhaps, as being formidable. In fact, the writer is concise in his narrative. And observe, they do not say, Crush them, cast them down; but what? And grant unto Your servants, that with all boldness they may speak Your word. Let us also learn thus to pray. And yet how full of wrath one would be, when fallen among men intent upon killing him, and making threats to that effect? How full of animosity? But not so these saints. By stretching forth Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done by the Name of Your holy Child Jesus. Acts 4:30 If in that Name the mighty deeds are wrought, great will be the boldness.

And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together. Acts 4:31 This was the proof that they were heard, and of His visitation. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost. What means, They were filled? It means, They were inflamed; and the Gift burned up within them. And they spoke the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul. Acts 4:32 Do you see that together with the grace of God they also contributed their part?

For everywhere it ought to be well observed, that together with the grace of God they do their part likewise. Just as Peter said above, Silver and gold have I none; and again, that they were all together. Acts 3:6 But in this place, having mentioned that they were heard, the sacred writer proceeds to speak also of them, what virtue they showed. Moreover, he is just about to enter upon the narrative of Sapphira and Ananias, and with a view to show the detestable conduct of that pair, he first discourses of the noble behavior of the rest.

Now say, did their love beget their poverty, or the poverty the love? In my opinion, the love begot the poverty, and then the poverty drew tight the cords of love. For observe what he says: They were all of one heart and of one soul. Behold, heart and soul are what make the together. Neither said any of them that anything of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power the Apostles rendered their testimony (ἐπέδωκον) of the resurrection.

Acts 4:33 The phrase betokens them to be as persons put in trust with a deposit: he speaks of it as a debt or obligation: that is, their testimony they with boldness did render, or pay off, to all. And great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked. Acts 4:34 Their feeling was just as if they were under the paternal roof, all for awhile sharing alike. It is not to be said, that though indeed they maintained the rest, yet they did it with the feeling that the means whereof they maintained them were still their own.

No, the admirable circumstance is this, that they first alienated their property, and so maintained the rest, on purpose that the maintenance might not come as of their own private means, but as of the common property. For as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the price of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the Apostles' feet; and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. Acts 4:35 A great mark of honor this, that they laid them at the Apostles' feet.

And Joses, who by the Apostles was surnamed Barnabas, ('which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation.') Acts 4:36 I do not think that this is the same with the companion of Matthias; for that person was also called Justus and [Barsabas, but this, Joses and] Barnabas [son of consolation]. I suppose he also received the name from his virtue, as being qualified and suited for this duty. A Levite, and of the country of Cyprus by birth. Observe on all occasions how the writer indicates the breaking up of the Law.

But how was he also a Cyprian by birth? Because they then even removed to other countries, and still were called Levites. Having land, sold it, and brought the price, and laid it at the Apostles' feet.

Let us now look over again what has been said. [And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.] Recapitulation, Acts 4:23 See the unostentatious conduct of the Apostles, and their largeness of mind. They did not go about boasting, and say, How we served (■ πεχρησ■μεθα) the priests! nor were they ambitious of honor: but, we read, they came unto their own company. Observe how they do not cast themselves upon temptations, but when the temptations present themselves, with courage endure them.

Had it been some other of the disciples, perhaps, emboldened by the countenance of the multitude, he might have insulted, might have vented ever so many harsh expressions. But not so these true philosophers; they do all with mildness and with gentleness. And when they heard that, we read, with one accord they lifted up their voice to God. Acts 4:24 That shout proceeded from delight and great emotion. Such indeed are the prayers which do their work, prayers replete with true philosophy, prayers offered up for such objects, by such persons, on such occasions, in such a manner; whereas all others are abominable and profane.

Lord, Thou the God that made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is. Observe how they say nothing idle, no old wives' talk and fables, but speak of His power. Just as Christ Himself said to the Jews, If I by the Spirit of God do cast out devils: behold the Father also speaks by the Spirit. For what says it? Lord, the God Who, by the Holy Ghost, through the mouth of our father Your servant David said, Why did the nations rage? Acts 4:25 Scripture is wont thus to speak of one as of many.

For of a truth, Lord, against Your Holy Child Jesus, Whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, etc. Acts 4:27 Observe how, even in prayer, they circumstantially describe the Passion, and refer all to God.-- That is, Not they had power to do this: but Thou did it all, Thou that permitted, that dost call to account, and yet brought to accomplishment, Thou the All-skilful and Wise, that served You of Your enemies for Your own pleasure. Acts 4:28 For to do whatever Your hand, etc.

Here they discourse of His exceeding Skill and Wisdom and Power. So then, as enemies they came together, and with murderous purpose, and as opposing themselves, but they did what things You would: For to do, as it is said, whatsoever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. What means, Your hand? Here he seems to me to denote one and the same thing by power and purpose, meaning that for You it is enough but to will: for it is not by power that one determines.

Whatsoever Your hand, etc. i.e. Whatsoever You ordained: either this is the meaning, or, that by His hand He did effect. And now, Lord, regard their threatenings. Acts 4:29 As at that time, it is said, they imagined vain things, so now, grant that their imaginations may be in vain: i.e. let not their threatenings come into accomplishment. And this they said not because they would themselves deprecate any hardship, but for the preaching's sake. For they do not say, and deliver us out of dangers; but what?

And grant unto Your servants, that with all boldness they may speak Your word. You Who brought to pass the former designs, bring these also to accomplishment. Observe, how they affirm God to be the Author of their confidence; and how they ask all for God's sake, nothing for their own glory or ambition. They promise for their own part, that they will not be dismayed; but they pray that signs may be wrought by stretching forth Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done: Acts 4:30 for without these, however great the zeal they showed, they would be striving to no purpose.

God assented to their prayer, and manifested this, by shaking the place. For when they had prayed, it is said, the place was shaken. Acts 4:31 And wherefore this was done, hear from the prophet, when he says, He looks on the earth, and makes it to tremble. Psalm 104:32 For by this He made it manifest that He is present to their prayers. And again, another prophet says, The earth was shaken, and did tremble at the presence of the Lord. Psalm 18:7; lxxviii, 8 And God did this, both to make it more awful, and to lead them on to a courageous trust.

And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. They gained increased boldness. As it was the beginning (of their work), and they had besought a sensible sign for their persuasion (πρὸς τὴν πεισθῆναι αὐτοὺς)-- but after this we nowhere find the like happening -- therefore great was the encouragement they received. In fact, they had no means of proving that He was risen, save by miraculous signs. So that it was not only their own assurance (ἐμφαλασθέντες) that they sought: but that they might not be put to shame, but that they might speak with boldness.

The place was shaken, and that made them all the more unshaken. For this is sometimes a token of wrath, sometimes of favor and providence, but on the present occasion, of wrath. For in those times it took place in an unusual manner. Thus, at the Crucifixion, the earth was shaken: and the Lord Himself says, Then there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. Matthew 24:7 But then the wrath of which it was a sign was against the adversaries: as for the disciples, it filled them with the Spirit.

Observe, even the Apostles, after the prayer, are filled with the Holy Ghost. And the multitudes of them that believed, etc. Acts 4:32 Great, you perceive, is the virtue of this thing, seeing their was need of this (grace) even in that Company. For this is the foundation of all that is good, this of which he now for the second time makes mention, exhorting all men to the contempt of riches: Neither said any of them that anything of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things common.

For that this was in consequence not merely of the miraculous signs, but of their own purpose, is manifest by the case of Sapphira and Ananias. And with great power gave the Apostles witness, etc. Acts 4:33 Not in word, but with power the Apostles exhibited their testimony of the Resurrection: just as Paul says, And my preaching was not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but with manifestation of the Spirit and of power. And it is not merely, With power, but, With great power. 1 Corinthians 2:4 And great grace, it says, was upon them all; for neither was there any among them that lacked.

Acts 4:34 This is why the grace (was upon them all,) for that there was none that lacked: that is, from the exceeding ardor of the givers, none was in want. For they did not give in part, and in part reserve: nor yet in giving all, give it as their own. And they lived moreover in great abundance: they removed all inequality from among them, and made a goodly order. For as many as were possessors, etc. And with great respect they did this: for they did not presume to give into their hands, nor did they ostentatiously present, but brought to the Apostles' feet.

To them they left it to be the dispensers, made them the owners, that thenceforth all should be defrayed as from common, not from private, property. This was also a help to them against vain-glory. If this were done now, we should live more pleasant lives, both rich and poor, nor would it be more pleasant to the poor than to the rich themselves. And if you please, let us now for awhile depict it in words, and derive at least this pleasure from it, since you have no mind for it in your actions.

For at any rate this is evident, even from the facts which took place then, that by selling their possessions they did not come to be in need, but made them rich that were in need. However, let us now depict this state of things in words, and let all sell their possessions, and bring them into the common stock -- in words, I mean: let none be excited, rich or poor. How much gold think you would be collected? For my part, I conjecture -- for of course it is not possible to speak exactly -- that supposing all here, men and women, to empty out their whole property, lands, possessions, houses -- for I will not speak of slaves, since at that time there was no such thing, but doubtless such as were slaves they sat at liberty -- perhaps ten hundred thousand pounds weight of gold would be the amount collected: nay, twice or thrice as much.

For consider; at what number of juga (yokes) is our city rated? How many (of the population) shall we say are Christians? Shall we say an hundred thousand, and the rest Greeks and Jews? Then what thousands (of pounds) of gold would be collected! And what is the number of poor? I do not think more than fifty thousand. Then to feed that number daily, what abundance there would be! And yet if the food were received in common, all taking their meals together, it would require no such great outlay after all.

But, you will ask, what should we do after the money was spent? And do you think it ever could be spent? Would not the grace of God be ten thousand fold greater? Would not the grace of God be indeed richly poured out? Nay, should we not make it a heaven upon earth? If, where the numbers were three thousand and five thousand, the doing of this thing had such splendid success, and none of them complained of poverty, how much more glorious would this be in so vast a multitude? And even of those that are without, who would not contribute?-- But, to show that it is the living separately that is expensive and causes poverty, let there be a house in which are ten children: and the wife and the man, let the one work at her wool, the other bring his earnings from his outdoor occupation: now tell me, in which way would these spend most?

By taking their meals together and occupying one house, or by living separately? Of course, by living separately. For if the ten children must live apart, they would need ten several rooms, ten tables, ten attendants, and the income otherwise in proportion. Is it not for this very reason, that where there is a great number of servants, they have all one table, that the expense may not be so great? For so it is, division always makes diminution, concord and agreement make increase.

The dwellers in the monasteries live just as the faithful did then: now did ever any of these die of hunger? Was ever any of them not provided for with plenty of everything? Now, it seems, people are more afraid of this than of falling into a boundless and bottomless deep. But if we had made actual trial of this, then indeed we should boldly venture upon this plan (το■ πρ■γματος). What grace too, think you, would there not be! For if at that time, when there was no believer but only the three thousand and the five thousand: when all, throughout the world, were enemies, when they could nowhere look for comfort, they yet boldly entered upon this plan with such success; how much more would this be the case now, when by the grace of God there are believers everywhere throughout the world?

What Gentile would be left? For my part, I think there would not be one: we should so attract all, and draw them to us? But yet if we do but make fair progress, I trust in God that even this shall be realized. Only do as I say, and let us successfully achieve things in their regular order; if God grant life, I trust that we shall soon bring you over to this way of life.

In the first place, as regards that law about swearing: accomplish that; establish it firmly: and let him that has kept it make known him that has not, and call him to account withal and rebuke him sternly. For the (supra, Hom. viii.) appointed time (■ προθεσμ■α), is at hand and I am holding inquisition in the matter, and him that is found guilty I will banish and exclude. But God forbid that any such should be found among us; rather may it appear, that all have strictly kept this spiritual watchword. And as in war it is by the watchword that friends and strangers are shown, so let it be now; for indeed now also we are engaged in a war; that we may know our brethren that are properly such. For what a good thing it is that we should have this to be our cognizance both here and in a foreign land! What a weapon this, against the very head of the devil! A mouth that cannot swear will soon both engage God in prayers, and smite the devil a deadly blow. A mouth that cannot swear will also be incapable of using insulting language. Cast out this fire from your tongue, as you would from a house: this fire, drag it out. Give your tongue a little rest: make the sore less virulent. Yea, I beseech you, do this, that I may go on to set you another lesson: for as long as this is not rightly done, I dare not pass on to any other. Let this lesson be got perfectly, and you shall have a consciousness of the achievement, and then I will introduce you to other laws, or rather not I, but Christ. Implant in your soul this good thing, and little by little you shall be a paradise of God, far better than that paradise of old. No serpent among you, no deadly tree, nor any such thing. Fix this habit deep. If this be done, not ye only that are present shall be benefitted, but all that are in all the world; and not they alone, but those that are to succeed hereafter. For a good habit having once entered, and being kept by all, will be handed on to long ages, and no circumstances shall be able to erase it. If he that gathered sticks on the sabbath was stoned -- the man that is doing a far more heinous work than that gathering, the man that is amassing a load of sins, for such is the multitude of oaths, what shall he undergo? What shall he not have to endure? You will receive great assistance from God, if this be well achieved by you. If I were to say, Be not abusive, immediately you will plead to me your indignation; should I say, Be not envious, you will urge some other excuse. But in this case you have nothing of the kind to say. On which account I began with the easy precepts, which indeed is also the uniform practice in all arts. And thus one comes to the higher duties, by learning first those which are easier far. How easy it is you will see, when by the grace of God having succeeded in this, you shall receive another precept.

Put it in my power to speak out boldly, in the presence both of Gentiles and of Jews, and, above all, of God. Yea, I entreat you by the love, by the pangs wherewith I have travailed for your birth, my little children. I will not add what follows, of whom I travail in birth again; nor will I say, until Christ be formed in you. Galatians 4:19. For I am persuaded, that Christ has been formed in you. Other language I will use towards you; My brethren, dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and my crown. Philippians 4:1 Believe me that I shall use no other language. If at this moment there were placed upon my head ten thousand richly-jewelled royal crowns, they could not give me the joy which I feel at your growth in holiness; or rather, I do not think the monarch himself has such a joy, as that wherewith I joy over you. Let him have come home, victorious over all the nations at war with him, let him have won many other crowns besides the crown of his right; and receive other diadems as tokens of his victory: I do not think he would joy over his trophies, as I joy over your soul's progress. For I exult, as if I had a thousand crowns on my head; and well may I rejoice. For if by the grace of God you achieve this good habit, you will have gained a thousand battles far more difficult than his; by wrestling and fighting with malicious demons, and fiendish spirits, with

the tongue, not with sword, but by the will. For consider how much is gained, if so be that you do succeed! You have eradicated, first, a heinous habit; secondly, an evil conceit, the source of all evil, namely, the opinion that the thing is indifferent and can do no hurt; thirdly, wrath; fourthly, covetousness; for all these are the offspring of swearing. Nay, hence you will acquire a sure footing in the way to all other virtues. For as when children learn their letters, they learn not them alone, but by means of them are gradually taught to read; so shall it be with you. That evil conceit will no longer deceive you, you will not say, This is indifferent; you will no longer speak by mere habit, but will manfully stand against all, so that having perfected in all parts that virtue which is after God, you may reap eternal blessings, through the grace and loving-kindness of His Only-Begotten Son, 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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