

Homily 15 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 15 explores Stephen's faith, the false accusations against him, and the lessons of suffering and obedience to God.

Scripture: Matthew 21:31, Luke 18:13, Acts 6:8-11, Romans 8:31, 1 Corinthians 12:8, Philippians 4:4

Topics: "Persecution And Faith", "Christian Humility"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the story of Stephen, highlighting his faith, power, and ability to perform miracles, which drew greater grace upon him. Stephen faced opposition from those of the synagogue who could not resist his wisdom and spirit. Despite false accusations of blasphemy, Stephen's countenance shone like an angel, reflecting God's grace. Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of faith, power, and grace in facing persecution and remaining steadfast in the face of adversity, drawing examples from biblical figures like Abraham, Hannah, and the publican. He urges believers to emulate Christ's gentleness and patience in the midst of trials and to cultivate a spirit of forgiveness and humility.

Transcript

Acts VI. 8

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

See how even among the seven one was preëminent, and won the first prize. For though the ordination was common to him and them, yet he drew upon himself greater grace. And observe, how he wrought no (signs and wonders) before this time, but only when he became publicly known; to show that grace alone is not sufficient, but there must be ordination also; so that there was a further access of the Spirit. For if they were full of the Spirit, it was of that which is from the Laver of Baptism.

Then there arose certain of them of the synagogue. Acts 6:9 Again he uses the phrase of rising up (ἐνστασις, Hom. xiii. p. 81), to denote their exasperation and wrath. Here we have a great multitude. And observe the difference in the form of accusation: for since Gamaliel had stopped them from finding fault on the former plea, they bring in another charge. And there rose up, it says, certain of them of the synagogue of those who are called (τῶν λεγομένων . Edd. τῆς λεγομένης) Libertines, and of the Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and Asia, disputing with Stephen.

And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke. Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. Acts 6:9-12 That they may establish the charge, the phrase is, he speaks against God, and against Moses. And with this object too they disputed, that they might force him to say somewhat. But he now discoursed more openly, and perhaps spoke of the cessation of the Divine Law: or, spoke it not, but hinted as much: since had he spoken plainly, there had been no need of suborned men, nor yet of false witnesses.

The synagogues were diverse: [to wit, Of the Libertines]: of the Cyrenians, i.e. those in the parts beyond Alexandria [of the Alexandrians, etc.]. There also they seem to have had synagogues according to their different nations; for many stayed behind there, that they might not be obliged to be continually travelling. The Libertines perhaps were freedmen of the Romans. As there were many foreigners dwelling there, so they had their synagogues, where the Law was to be read. Disputing with Stephen.

Observe him, not taking upon him to teach, but forced to do so. The miracles once more brought him into ill-will; but when he overcame in argument, it was false-witness! For they did not wish to kill intolerable to them. They could not resist, etc.: then they suborned men. Everywhere out of hand, but by means of a sentence, that they might hurt their reputation also: and leaving those (the Apostles), they attack these (the disciples), thinking in this way to terrify those also.

They say not, he speaks, but, he ceases not to speak. And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council, and set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceases not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law. (v. 12, 13.) Ceases not, say they, as if he made this his business. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

Acts 6:14 Jesus, they say, the Nazarene, as a term of reproach, shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs. This is also what they said about Christ. Thou that destroyest this Temple. Matthew 27:40 For great was their veneration for the Temple (as indeed they had chosen to leave their own country (μετοικεσεν) in order to be near it) and for the name of Moses. The charge is twofold. If He shall change the customs, He will also introduce others instead: observe how the charge is a bitter one, and fraught with perils.

And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. Acts 6:15 So possible is it even for one in a lower degree to shine. For what, I ask, had this man less than the Apostles? He lacked not miracles, and great was the boldness he exhibited. -- They saw His face, it is said, as it had been the face of an angel. Exodus 34:30 For this was his grace, this was the glory of Moses. God made him thus gracious (παραχρησασθαι) of visage, now that he was about to say somewhat, thus at once by his very look to awe them.

For there are, yes, there are faces full-fraught with spiritual grace, lovely to them that love, awful to haters and enemies. It mentions also the reason, why they suffered his oration.-- Then, it proceeds, said the high-priest, Are these things so? Acts 7:1 Observe, the question is put with mildness, that he may effect some great mischief. For this reason Stephen too begins his speech in a tone of gentleness, and says, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran.

Acts 7:2 Immediately at the outset he overthrows their conceit, and makes it appear by what he says, that the temple is nothing, that the customs are nothing either, without their suspecting his drift: also that they

shall not overcome the preaching; and that from powerless (μηχων) things God evermore contrives Him powerful (εμχανα) instruments. Mark then how these threads make the texture of the whole speech: and moreover that having evermore enjoyed exceeding goodness, they still requited their Benefactor with the opposite conduct, and that they are now attempting impossibilities.

The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he came into Charran. Both the temple was not, and sacrifice was not, and yet a vision of God was vouchsafed to Abraham, and yet had he Persians for his ancestors, and was in a strange land. And he does well at the beginning of his speech to call Him, the God of glory: seeing that He has made them that are without honor to be glorious. Because (says he) it was He that made them glorious, He will make us also.

Observe how he leads them away from things of the body, from the place, in the first instance, as the place was in question. The God of glory, says he: implying again, that He needs not the glory which comes from us, which comes by the Temple: for Himself is the Fountain thereof. Think not, he would say, in this way to glorify Him. And from your kindred. How then says the Scripture, that Abraham's father was willing to go out? Hence we learn, that it was in consequence of Abraham's vision, that his father was moved to join in the migration.

Genesis 11:31 And said to him, Get you out of your country, and from your kindred, and come into a land which I shall show you. Acts 7:3 It shows how far these men are from being children of Abraham, how obedient he was. And from your kindred. Uncomfortable (φορτικ) reflections, both, that he endured the labors, while you reap the fruits, and that all your ancestors were in evil case. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldæans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, He removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.

And He gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on. (v. 4, 5.) See how he raises their thoughts away from (their possession of) the land. For if He said (that, He will give: clearly [all came from him], and nothing from themselves. For he came, having left both kindred and country. Wherefore then did He not give it to him? Truly it was a figure of another land. And He promised to give it to him. Do you perceive, that he does not merely resume the thread of his discourse?

He gave him not, says he; and He promised; and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child. Again, what God can do: that out of impossibilities, He does all. For here is a man in Persia, so far away, and this man God says He will make lord of Palestine. But let us look back to what was said before.

Whence, I pray you, did that grace bloom upon the countenance of Stephen? (Recapitulation.) The writer gives him this report above, that he was full of faith. Acts 6:8. For it is possible to have a grace that does not consist in works of healing: For to one is given the grace of the Spirit 1 Corinthians 12:8-9 in such and such wise (τοισδε). But here, it seems to me, it says that he was also gracious to look at: They saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. Full of faith and of power: Acts 6:15 which is also the character given of Barnabas he was a good man, full of faith and of the Holy Ghost.

Acts 11:24 Whence we learn that the sincere and innocent are, above all others, the men to be saved, and that these same are also more gracious. Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words. Acts 6:11 In the case of the Apostles they were annoyed that they preached the Resurrection, and that much people flowed unto them: but in this case, that they were getting their diseases healed. Acts 4:2 The things for which they ought to give thanks, they made matter of blame: O the madness!

The men who overcame them by works, they expected to overcome by words! It is just what they did in the case of Christ, and always they forced them to words. For they were ashamed to seize them without more ado, having nothing to charge them with. And observe, not the persons themselves who bring them to judgment bear witness against them; for they would have been refuted: but they simply hire others, that it may not seem to be an act of mere violence. It is all of a piece with their proceeding in the case of Christ.

And observe the power of the preaching, that, though they are not only scourged but stoned, it still prevails: not only, private individuals as they are, dragged to the bar, but assailed from all quarters: and, their enemies themselves being witnesses, not only were these worsted, but they were not able even to resist Acts 6:10, though they were exceeding shameless: so mightily did it overthrow them, for all that they could do with their preposterous figments (as the saying that He had a devil-- He that cast out devils!).

For the battle was not man's, but God's against men. And there were many combined together; not only they in Jerusalem, but others as well. Acts 6:9 For we have heard him, say they, speaking blasphemous words against Moses and against God. Acts 6:11 O you shameless ones! You work blasphemous deeds, and think nothing of it. This is why Moses is added -- because the things of God were no great concern to them: and it is ever and always Moses that they make mention of: This Moses, which brought us out.

Acts 7:40 And they stirred up the people. Acts 6:12 Fickleness of the multitude! And yet how could a man who was a blasphemer have so succeeded? How could a blasphemer work such miracles among the people? But the undisciplined multitude made them strong who had the worst of it (in argument).-- This was what most annoyed them. We have heard him, they say, speaking blasphemous words against Moses and against God Acts 6:13: and again, This man ceases not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law, and with an addition, the customs which Moses delivered to us Acts 6:14; Moses, not God.

Upon the supposition of a design to overturn their manner of life (πολιτείας), they accused him of impiety also. But to show that it was not in the nature of such a man to speak such things, and harshly [Then all, it says, which were in the council, looking steadfastly upon him, saw his face, as it had been the face of an angel] Acts 6:15: so mild was he even in countenance. For, in cases where persons were not falsely accused, Scripture mentions nothing of this kind: but as in this case it was all false accusation, with reason does God rectify it by the very look of the man.

For the Apostles indeed were not falsely accused, but were forbidden: but this man is falsely accused: and therefore before all else his countenance pleads for him. This abashed even the priest. And he said, etc. Acts 7:1 He shows here, that the promise was made before the Place, before Circumcision, before Sacrifice, before the Temple, and that it was not of their merit that these received either Circumcision or Law, but that the land was the reward of obedience alone. Moreover, that neither on the giving of circumcision does the promise receive its fulfillment.

Also, that these were figures, and (so was) both the leaving his country at God's command -- not against the law (for home and country is where God shall lead): Then came he out, it says, of the land of the Chaldeans Acts 7:4:-- and that if one look closely into the matter, the Jews are of Persian origin: and that, without miracles, one must do as God bids, whatever hardships be the consequence; since the Patriarch left both the grave of his father and all that he had, in obedience to God's command.

But if Abraham's father was not allowed to take part with him in the privilege of migrating to Palestine, because he was unworthy: much more shall the children (be excluded at last), for all that they may have

gone a good distance on the way. And He promised, it says, to give it to him, and to his seed after him. Acts 7:5 Herein is shown the greatness both of God's goodness and of Abraham's faith. For the expression, when as yet he had no child, does show his obedience and faith.

Promised to give it to him and to his seed. And yet the events showed the contrary: namely, after he came, he had not so much as to set his foot on, had not a child; which very things were contrary to his faith.

These things having seen, let us likewise, whatever God shall promise, receive the same, however contrary may be the events. And yet in our case, they are not contrary, but very suitable. For where the promises are, there, when the contraries turn out, they are really contrary; but in our case it is just the reverse: for He has told us that we should have tribulation here, but our rest there. Why do we confound the times? Why do we turn things upside down? Say, are you afflicted, and livest in poverty, and in dejection? Be not troubled: for it were worth being troubled at, were thou destined to be afflicted in that world: as for this present affliction, it is the cause of rest. This sickness, says He, is not unto death. John 11:4 That affliction is punishment: this, schooling and correction. It is a contest, this life present: if so, to fight is our business now: it is war and battle. In war one does not seek to have rest, in war one does not seek to have dainty living, one is not anxious about riches, one's care is not about a wife then: one thing only he looks at, how he may overcome his foes. Be this our care likewise: if we overcome, and return with the victory, God will give us all things. Be this alone our study, how we may overcome the devil: though after all it is not our own study that does it, but God's grace does the whole business. Be it our one study, how we may attract His grace, how we may draw to ourselves that assistance. If God be for us, who can be against us? Romans 8:31 Let us make one thing our study; that He be not our enemy, that He turn not away from us.

Not the being afflicted is an evil; the evil is, to sin. This is the sore affliction, however we may pass our days in luxury:-- not to speak of the life to come, it is so even in this life present. Think how our conscience is stung with remorse, and whether this is not worse than any kind of torture! I should like to put the question searchingly to those who live in evil ways (■ ν κακο■ς), whether they never come to reflect upon their own sins, whether they do not tremble, and are in fear and anguish, whether they do not think those blessed who live in abstinence, them of the mountains, them of the strict rule? (το■ς ■ν πολλο■ φιλοσοφ■& 139.)

Do you wish to find rest in the life to come? Suffer affliction in this life for Christ's sake: there is nothing equal to this rest. The Apostles rejoiced when scourged. Paul gives this exhortation, saying, Rejoice in the Lord. Philippians 4:4 And how can there be rejoicing, where there are bonds, where there are tortures; where there are courts of justice? There, most of all, is rejoicing. But say, how can there be rejoicing, where these are not? For he who is conscious of no evil, will have a sort of exceeding delight, insomuch that in what degree you speak of tribulation, in the same you tell of his delight.

The soldier who has received numberless wounds and has come home again, will he not return with exceeding delight, with his wounds as his title for speaking up boldly, and as evidence of his glory and renown? And thou, if you be able to exclaim as Paul does, I bear the marks of Jesus Galatians 6:17, will be able to become great and glorious and renowned. But there is no persecution. Make your stand against glory: and should any one speak anything against you, fear not to be evil-spoken of for Christ's sake: make your stand against the tyranny of pride, against the fighting of anger, against the torment of concupiscence.

These also are marks, these also are torments. For, I ask, what is the worst in tortures? Is it not, that the soul is pained, and is on fire? For in the other case, the body too has its share: but in this, the whole belongs to the soul. On the soul alone comes all the smart, when one is angry, when one is envious, whatever else of this kind one does, or rather suffers. For, in fact, it is not action, but passion, not a doing, but a suffering -- to be angered, to feel envy: therefore indeed they are called passions (or sufferings) (π■θη, perturbationes) of the soul, yea wounds, and bruises.

For it is indeed a suffering, and worse than suffering. Bethink you, you that are angry, that you do such things in passion, in a state of suffering. Therefore he who is not angry suffers not. Do you mark that not he who is abused is the sufferer, but he that abuses, as I said above? For that he is a sufferer, is plain in the first place from the very fact, that such a thing is called by this name of passion: and it is also plain from the (effects on the) body: for these are the affections (π■θη) for sufferings, as we call them] engendered by anger, viz. dimness of vision, insanity, and numberless others.

But he insulted my boy, say you; but [he called him] clown. Deem it not weakness your not doing the same thing yourself. For, I ask you, was it well done? You will not say that: then leave that undone which being done were not well done. I know what passions are engendered in such cases. But, say you, how if he despise me, how if he say it again? Show him that he is in the wrong: rebuke him, entreat him: by meekness anger is put down: go and expostulate with him. For though in cases of wrong done to ourselves it is right not to do even this, yet it is quite necessary to do it in behalf of others.

Do not look on it as an insult to yourself that your boy has been insulted: annoyed you may be for his sake, yet not as if you were insulted: for it does not follow because your boy has been ill-treated, that you are disgraced, but he is disgraced that did the ill. Quench (your anger) that sharp sword: let it lie in its scabbard. If we have it unsheathed, we shall be apt to use it even when the time is not proper, being drawn on by it: but if it be hidden, though a necessity should arise, yet, while we seek it in order to draw it, the anger will be quenched.

Christ would not have us be angry on his account: (hear what He says to Peter: Put up again your sword into the sheath:) Matthew 26:52 and are you angry on account of a boy? Teach your boy also to be philosophical: tell him your own sufferings: imitate (herein) your Teacher. Matthew 26:52 When they too (His disciples) were about to be treated with dishonor, He said not, I will avenge you: but, to Me also, says He, they have done the same: bear it nobly, for you are not better than I.

These words too do thou speak to your son and your boy: You are not better than your master. But these words of philosophy are counted as the talk of a widow woman. Alas! That it is not in the power of words to bring it home to people in the way that it is possible to be taught it by actual experience! And that you may learn this; stand between two combatants, take part with the wronged, not with the wrong-doers [that you may learn] whether you shall not see the victory on your side, whether you shall not get splendid crowns.-- See, how God is insulted, and how He answers; how gently, Where, says He, is Abel your brother? and what says the other: Am I my brother's keeper?

Genesis 6:9 What could be more contumacious than this? Would any one have heard it (patiently) even from a son? And if from a brother, would he not have thought such conduct an insult? What then? See how again God gently answers, The voice of your brother's blood, says He cries unto Me. But God, it will be said, is superior to wrath. Yes, but for this reason the Son of God came down, that He might make you a God as far as human power can go. But I cannot, says one, seeing I am man.

Well then, let us give you men for instances. And do not suppose I speak of Paul or of Peter: no, but of some of inferior sort, yea, very much lower down. Eli's menial insulted Hannah, saying, Put away your wine from you. 1 Samuel 1:14 What could be more insulting than this? What then said she? I am a woman of a hard lot. Indeed, there is nothing equal to affliction: she is the mother of true philosophy. But this same woman, though she has her rival, insulted her not: but what does she?

She takes refuge with God, and in her prayer does not even make mention of her, nor say, Avenge me, for such an one reproaches me: so magnanimous was that woman (let us men be ashamed):-- and yet ye know, that there is nothing like jealousy. The publican, when insulted by the Pharisee, insulted not in return, though, had he wished it, he might have done so: but he bore it like a philosopher, saying, Be merciful to me a sinner. Luke 18:13 Mephibosheth, having been accused and calumniated by his servant, neither said, nor did, any evil to him, not even in the presence of the king himself. 2 Samuel 19:26 Shall I tell you even of a harlot, what philosophic magnanimity she showed?

Hear Christ saying, as she was wiping His feet with her hair, The publicans and harlots go into the kingdom before you. Matthew 21:31 Do you see her standing, and taking courage, and washing away her own sins? Observe, how she was not angry even with the Pharisee, when reproached by him: for had He known, says he, that this woman is a sinner, He would not have suffered her Luke 7:39: and how she said not to him, What then? Say, are you pure from sins? but felt more, wept more, and let fall hotter tears.

But if women and publicans and harlots play the philosopher, and that before grace (i.e. of Baptism), what pardon can they deserve, who, after so great grace, fight, and worry, and kick one another, worse than beasts? Nothing is more base than passion, nothing more disgraceful, nothing more frightful, nothing more odious, nothing more hurtful. These things I say, not only in order that towards men we may be gentle, but also if a wife be a talker, that you may bear it: let your wife be to you a school for training and exercise (παλαστρα καὶ γυμνασιον).

For how can it but be absurd, to submit to exercises which yield no profit, where we afflict the body, but not to practise exercises at home, which, even before the contest, present to us a crown? Does your wife abuse you? Do not thou become a woman: to be abusive is womanly: it is a disease of the soul, an inferiority. Think not that it is unworthy of you, when your wife abuses you. Unworthy it is, when you are abusive, but she bears patiently (φιλοσοφῶ): then do you act unseemly, then are you disgraced: but if, having been abused, thou bear it, great is the proof of your strength.

I do not say this, to induce wives to be abusive: God forbid: but only in case it should so happen at the instance of Satan. It is the part of men that are strong, to bear the weak. And if your servant contradict you, bear it philosophically: not what he deserves to have said to him, do thou say or do, but that which it behooves you both to do and to say. Never insult a girl by uttering some foul word against her: never call your servant, scoundrel (μιαρῶν): not he is disgraced, but thou.

It is not possible to be master of one's self, being in a passion. Like a sea rolling mountains high, it is all hurly-burly: or even as a pure fountain, when mire is cast into it, becomes muddied, and all is in turmoil. You may beat him, you may rend his coat to rags, but it is you that sustain the greater damage: for to him the blow is on the body and the garment, but to you on the soul. It is your own soul that you have cut open; it is there that you have inflicted a wound: you have flung your own charioteer from his horses, you have got him dragging along the ground upon his back.

And it is all one, as if one driver being in a passion with another, should choose to be thus dragged along. You may rebuke, you may chide, you may do whatever if be, only let it be without wrath and passion. For if he who rebukes is physician to him who offends, how can he heal another, when he has first hurt himself, when he does not heal himself? Say, if a physician should go to heal another person, does he first wound his own hand, first blind his own eyes, and so set about healing that other?

God forbid. So also, however thou rebuke, however thou chide, let your eyes see clearly. Do not make your mind muddy, else how shall the cure be wrought? It is not possible to be in the same tranquillity, being in a passion, and being free from passion. Why do you first overturn your master from his seat, and then discourse with him as he lies sprawling on the ground? Do you see not the judges, how, when about to hold the assize, they seat themselves upon the bench, in their becoming attire?

Thus do thou likewise dress your soul with the judicial robe (which is gentleness). But he will not be afraid of me, say you. He will be the more afraid. In the other case, though you speak justly, your servant will impute it to passion: but if you do it with gentleness, he will condemn himself: and, what is of the first importance, God will accept you, and thus you will be able to attain unto the eternal blessings, through the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father together with the Holy Spirit be glory, dominion, and honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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