

Homily 26 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon highlights the importance of prayer, vigilance, and faith in the face of persecution, using the story of Peter's imprisonment and escape as a powerful example.

Scripture: Acts 12:1-17

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

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the persecution faced by the early Church under Herod the King, highlighting the martyrdom of James the brother of John and the miraculous deliverance of Peter from prison. Chrysostom emphasizes the faith and courage displayed by the apostles in the face of severe trials, showing how their suffering served to strengthen the Church and demonstrate God's power. He encourages believers to emulate the steadfastness and prayerful devotion of the early Christians, even in the midst of persecution and adversity.

Transcript

Acts XII. 1, 2

Now at that time Herod the King stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the Church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. Then were the days of unleavened bread.

At that time, of course meaning the time immediately following: for this is the custom of Scripture. And he well says that Herod the king (did this): this was not he of Christ's time. Lo, a different sort of trial -- and mark what I said in the beginning, how things are blended, how rest and trouble alternate in the whole texture of the history -- not now the Jews, nor the Sanhedrin, but the king. Greater the power, the warfare more severe, the more it was done to obtain favor with the Jews.

And, it says, he slew James the brother of John with the sword: (taking him) at random and without selection. But, should any raise a question, why God permitted this, we shall say, that it was for the sake of these (Jews) themselves: thereby, first, convincing them, that even when slain (the Apostles) prevail, just as it was in the case of Stephen: secondly, giving them opportunity, after satiating their rage, to recover from their madness; thirdly, showing them that it was by His permission this was done.

And when he saw, it says, that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. O excessive wickedness! On whose behalf was it, that he gratified them by doing murders thus without plan or reason? And it was the day of unleavened bread. Again, the idle preciseness of the Jews: to kill indeed they forbade not, but at such a time they did such things! Whom having arrested, he put in ward, having delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers. Acts 12:4 This was done both of rage, and of fear.

He slew, it says, James the brother of John with the sword. Do you mark their courage? For, that none may say that without danger or fear of danger they brave death, as being sure of God's delivering them, therefore he permits some to be put to death, and chief men too, Stephen and James, thereby convincing their slayers themselves, that not even these things make them fall away, and hinder them. Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the Church unto God for him.

Acts 12:5 For the contest was now for life and death: both the slaying of the one made them fearful, and the casting of the other into prison. And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and the keepers before the door kept the prison. And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. (v. 6, 7.)

In that night He delivered him. And a light shined in the prison, that he might not deem it fancy: and none saw the light, but he only. For if, notwithstanding this was done, he thought it a fancy, because of its unexpectedness; if this had not been, much more would he have thought this: so prepared was he for death. For his having waited there many days and not being saved caused this. Why then, say you, did He not allow him to fall into the hands of Herod, and then deliver him?

Because that would have brought people into astonishment, whereas this was credible: and they would not even have been thought human beings. But in the case of Stephen, what did He not do? Did He not show them his face as it had been the face of an angel? But what in short did He leave undone here also? And the angel said to him, Gird yourself, and bind on your sandals. Acts 12:8 Here again it shows, that it was not done of craft: for one that is in haste and wishes to break out (of prison), is not so particular as to take his sandals, and gird himself.

And he did so. And he said to him, Put on your cloak, and follow me. And he went out, and followed him; and knew not that it was true which was done by the Angel; but thought he saw a vision. When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leads unto the city; which opened to them of its own accord. (v. 9, 10.) Behold, a second miracle. And they went out, and passed on through one street; and immediately the angel departed from him. And when Peter had come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord has sent His Angel, and has delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews. (v. 10, 11.)

When the angel departed, then Peter understood: Now I perceive, says he, not then. But why is this so, and why is Peter not sensible of the things taking place, although he had already experienced a like deliverance when all were released? Acts 5:18 (The Lord) would have the pleasure come to him all at once, and that he should first be at liberty, and then be sensible of what had happened. The circumstance also of the chains having fallen off from his hands, is a strong argument of his not having fled.

And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying. Acts 12:12 Observe how Peter does not

immediately withdraw, but first brings the good tidings to his friends. And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda. And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness,-- Mark even the servant-girls, how full of piety they are --but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate.

Acts 12:13-15 But they, though it was so, shook their heads (incredulously): And they said to her, You are mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. And they said, It is his angel. But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished. But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go show these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place. (v. 16, 17.) But let us review the order of the narrative.

(Recapitulation.) At that time, it says, Herod the king stretched forth his hands to afflict certain of the Church. Acts 12:1 Like a wild beast, he attacked all indiscriminately and without consideration. This is what Christ said: My cup indeed you shall drink, and with the baptism wherewith I am baptized, shall you be baptized. Mark 10:39 (b) And he killed James the brother of John. Acts 12:2 For there was also another James, the brother of the Lord: therefore to distinguish him, he says, The brother of John.

Do you mark that the sum of affairs rested in these three, especially Peter and James? (a) And how was it he did not kill Peter immediately? It mentions the reason: it was the day of unleavened bread: and he wished rather to make a display (■ κρομπε■σαι) with the killing of him. And when he saw it pleased the Jews. Acts 12:3 For their own part, they now in consequence of Gamaliel's advice, abstained from bloodshedding: and besides, did not even invent accusations; but by means of others they compassed the same results. (c) This (counsel of Gamaliel's) above all was their condemnation: for the preaching was shown to be no longer a thing of men.

He proceeded further to kill Peter also. ch. 5:8 In very deed was that fulfilled, We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Psalm 44:13 Seeing, it says, it was a pleasing thing to the Jews. Romans 8:36 A pleasing thing, bloodshed, and unrighteous bloodshed, wickedness, impiety! He ministered to their senseless (■ τ■ποις) lusts: for, whereas he ought to have done the contrary, to check their rage, he made them more eager, as if he were an executioner, and not a physician to their diseased minds. (And this) though he had numberless warnings in the case of both his grandfather and his father Herod, how the former in consequence of his putting the children to death suffered the greatest calamities, and the latter by slaying John raised up against himself a grievous war.

But as they thought * * He feared lest Peter, in consequence of the slaying of James, should withdraw; and wishing to have him in safe keeping, he put him in prison: and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers Acts 12:4: the stricter the custody, the more wondrous the display. Peter therefore was kept in prison. Acts 12:5 But this was all the better for Peter, who was thereby made more approved, and evinced his own manly courage. And it says, there was earnest prayer making.

It was the prayer of (filial) affection: it was for a father they asked, a father mild. There was, it says, earnest prayer. Hear how they were affected to their teachers. No factions, no perturbation: but they betook them to prayer, to that alliance which is indeed invincible, to this they betook them for refuge. They did not say, What? I, poor insignificant creature that I am, to pray for him! for, as they acted of love, they did not give these things a thought. And observe, it was during the feast, that (their enemies) brought these trials upon them, that their worth might be the more approved.

And when Herod, etc. Acts 12:6 See Peter sleeping, and not in distress or fear! That same night, after which he was to be brought forth, he slept, having cast all upon God. Between two soldiers, bound with two chains. cf. 1 Peter 5:7 Mark, how strict the ward! And says, Arise. Acts 12:7 The guards were asleep with him, and therefore perceived nothing of what was happening. And a light shined. What was the light for? In order that Peter might see as well as hear, and not imagine it to be all fancy.

And the command, Arise quickly, that he may not be remiss. He also smote him; so deeply did he sleep. (a) Rise, says he, quickly: this is not to hurry him (θορυβο■ντος) but to persuade him not to delay. (c) And immediately his chains fell off from his hands. (b) How? Answer me: where are the heretics?-- let them answer. And the Angel said to him, etc. Acts 12:8 by this also convincing him that it is no fancy: to this end he bids him gird himself and put on his shoes, that he may shake off his sleep, and know that it is real. (a) (e) And he knew not that it was true that was done by the Angel, but thought he saw a vision Acts 12:9: (e) well he might, by reason of the excessive greatness (■ περβολ■ν) of the things taking place.

Do you mark what a thing it is for a miracle to be excessive (■ περβολ■ σημε■ου)? How it amazes (■ κπλ■τει) the beholder? How it will not let the thing be believed? For if Peter thought he saw a vision, though he had girded himself and put on his shoes, what would have been the case with another? And, it says, when they had passed the first and the second ward, they came to the iron gate, which opened unto them of its own accord Acts 12:10: and yet the things that had happened within (the prison) were more marvellous: but this was now more after the manner of man.

And having gone out, they went along one street and immediately (all 'until') the Angel departed from him. Acts 12:11 When there was no hindrance, then the Angel departed. For Peter would not have gone along (προ■λθεν), there being so many hindrances. And when he came to himself: for in very truth, it was indeed an amazement (■ κπληξις). Now, says he, I know-- now, not then, when I was in the prison --that the Lord has sent His Angel, and has delivered me out of the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.

And when he had considered Acts 12:12, it says: viz. where he was, or, that he must not without more ado depart but requite his Benefactor: he came to the house of Mary the mother of John. Who is this John? Probably he that was always with them: for this is why he adds his distinctive name (τ■ παρ■σημον), whose surname was Mark. But observe, praying in the night, how much they got by it: what a good thing affliction is; how wakeful it made them! Do you see how great the gain resulting from the death of Stephen?

Do you see how great the benefit accruing from this imprisonment? For it is not by taking vengeance upon those who wronged them that God shows the greatness of the Gospel: but in the wrong-doers themselves, without any harm happening to those, he shows what a mighty thing the afflictions in themselves are, that we may not seek in any wise deliverance from them, nor the avenging of our wrongs. And mark how the very servant-girls were henceforth upon an equality with them. For joy, it says, she opened not. (v. 13, 14.)

This too is well done, that they likewise may not be amazed by seeing him at once, and that they may be incredulous, and their minds may be exercised. But ran in, etc. just as we are wont to do, she was eager to be herself the bringer of the good tidings, for good news it was indeed. And they said to her, You are mad: but she constantly affirmed that it was even so: then said they, It is his Angel. Acts 12:15 This is a truth, that each man has an Angel. And what would the Angel?

It was from the time (of night) that they surmised this. But when he continued knocking, and when they had opened, and saw him, they were astonished. But he beckoning to them with his hand (v. 16, 17), made them keep quiet, to hear all that had happened to him. He was now an object of more affectionate desire to the disciples, not only in consequence of his being saved, but by his sudden coming in upon them and straightway departing. Now, both his friends learn all clearly; and the aliens also learn, if they had a mind, but they had not.

The same thing happened in the case of Christ. Tell these things, he says, to James, and to the brethren. How free from all vainglory! Nor did he say, Make known these things to people everywhere, but, to the brethren. And he withdrew to another place: for he did not tempt God, nor fling himself into temptation: since, when they were commanded to do this, then they did it. Go, it was said, speak in the temple to the people. Acts 5:20 But this the Angel said not (here); on the contrary, by silently removing him and bringing him out by night, he gave him free permission to withdraw -- and this too is done, that we may learn that many things are providentially brought about after the manner of men -- so that he should not again fall into peril.-- For that they may not say, It was his Angel, after he had gone, they say this first, and then they see himself overthrowing their notion of the matter. Had it been the Angel, he would have knocked at the door, would not have retired to another place. And what followed in the day, make them sure.

So Peter was kept in the prison, etc. Acts 12:5 They, being at large, were at prayer: he, bound, was in sleep. And he knew not that it was true. Acts 12:9 If he thought it was true that was happening, he would have been astonished, he would not have remembered (all the circumstances): but now, seeming to be in a dream, he was free from perturbation. When, it says, they were past the first and the second ward -- see also how strong the guard was -- they came unto the iron gate. Acts 12:10 Now know I that the Lord has sent His Angel. Acts 12:11 Why is not this effected by themselves? (I answer,) By this also the Lord honors them, that by the ministry of His Angels he rescues them. Then why was it not so in the case of Paul? There with good reason, because the jailer was to be converted, whereas here, it was only that the Apostle should be released. Acts 16:25 And God disposes all things in various ways. And there too, it is beautiful, that Paul sings hymns, while here Peter was asleep. And when he had considered, he came to the house of Mary, etc. Acts 12:12 Then let us not hide God's marvels, but for our own good let us study to display these abroad for the edifying of the others. For as he deserves to be admired for choosing to be put into bonds, so is he worthy of more admiration, that he withdrew not until he had reported all to his friends. And he said, Tell James and the brethren. Acts 12:17 That they may rejoice: that they may not be anxious. Through these those learn, not those through him: such thought had he for the humbler part!--

Truly, nothing better than affliction not above measure (σὺμμ■τρον). What think you must have been their state of mind -- how full of delight! Where now are those women, who sleep the whole night through? Where are those men, who do not even turn themselves in their bed? Do you see the watchful soul? With women, and children, and maid-servants, they sang hymns to God, made purer than the sky by affliction. But now, if we see a little danger, we fall back. Nothing ever was more splendid than that Church. Let us imitate these, let us emulate them. Not for this was the night made, that we should sleep all through it and be idle. To this bear witness the artisans, the carriers, and the merchants (to this), the Church of God rising up in the midst of the night. Rise thou up also, and behold the quire of the stars, the deep silence, the profound repose: contemplate with awe the order (ο■κονομ■αν) of your Master's household. Then is your soul purer: it is lighter, and subtler, and soaring disengaged: the darkness itself, the profound silence, are sufficient to lead you to compunction. And if also thou look to the heavens studded with its stars, as with ten thousand eyes, if you bethink you that all those multitudes who in the daytime are shouting,

laughing, frisking, leaping, wronging, grasping, threatening, inflicting wrongs without number, lie all one as dead, you will condemn all the self-willedness of man. Sleep has invaded and defeated (■ λεγξεν) nature: it is the image of death, the image of the end of all things. If thou (look out of window and) lean over into the street, you will not hear even a sound: if you look into the house, you will see all lying as it were in a tomb. All this is enough to arouse the soul, and lead it to reflect on the end of all things.

Here indeed my discourse is for both men and women. Bend your knees, send forth groans, beseech your Master to be merciful: He is more moved by prayers in the night, when you make the time for rest a time for mourning. Remember what words that king uttered: I have been weary with my groaning: every night will I wash my bed, I will water my couch with my tears. Psalm 6:6 However delicate a liver you may be, you are not more delicate than he: however rich you may be, you are not richer than David.

And again the same Psalmist says, At midnight I rose to give thanks unto You for the judgments of Your righteousness. Psalm 119:62 No vainglory then intrudes upon you: how can it, when all are sleeping, and not looking at you? Then neither sloth nor drowsiness invades you: how can they, when your soul is aroused by such great things? After such vigils come sweet slumbers and wondrous revelations. Do this, thou also the man, not the woman only. Let the house be a Church, consisting of men and women.

For think not because you are the only man, or because she is the only woman there, that this is any hindrance. For where two, He says, are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them. Matthew 18:20 Where Christ is in the midst, there is a great multitude. Where Christ is, there needs must Angels be, needs must Archangels also and the other Powers be there. Then you are not alone, seeing you have Him Who is Lord of all. Hear again the prophet also saying, Better is one that does the will of the Lord, than ten thousand transgressors. comp.

Sirach 16:3 Nothing more weak than a multitude of unrighteous men, nothing more strong than one man who lives according to the law of God. If you have children wake up them also, and let your house altogether become a Church through the night: but if they be tender, and cannot endure the watching, let them stay for the first or second prayer, and then send them to rest: only stir up yourself, establish yourself in the habit. Nothing is better than that storehouse which receives such prayers as these.

Hear the Prophet speaking: If I remembered You upon my bed, I thought upon You in the dawn of the morning. Psalm 63:7 But you will say: I have labored much during the day, and I cannot. Mere pretext this and subterfuge. For however much you have labored, you will not toil like the smith, who lets fall such a heavy hammer from a great height upon the (metal flying off in) sparks, and takes in the smoke with his whole body: and yet at this work he spends the greater part of the night.

You know also how the women, if there is need for us to go into the country, or to go forth unto a vigil, watch through the whole night. Then have thou also a spiritual forge, to fashion there not pots or cauldrons, but your own soul, which is far better than either coppersmith or goldsmith can fashion. Your soul, waxen old in sins, cast thou into the smelting-furnace of confession: let fall the hammer from on high: that is, the condemnation of your words (τ■ν ■ημ■των τ■ν κατ■γνωσιν): light up the fire of the Spirit.

You have a far mightier craft (than theirs). You are beating into shape not vessels of gold, but the soul, which is more precious than all gold, even as the smith hammers out his vessel. For it is no material vessel that you are working at, but you are freeing your soul from all imaginations belonging to this life. Let a lamp be by your side, not that one which we burn, but that which the prophet had, when he said, Your law is a lamp unto my feet. Psalm 119:105 Bring your soul to a red heat, by prayer: when you see it hot

enough, draw it out, and mould it into what shape you will.

Believe me, not fire so effectual to burn off rust, as night prayer to remove the rust of our sins. Let the night-watchers, if no one else, shame us. They, by man's law, go their rounds in the cold, shouting loudly, and walking through lanes (στενωπ■v) and alleys, oftentimes drenched with rain and (all) congealed with cold, for you and for your safety, and the protection of your property. There is he taking such care for your property, while you take none even for your soul.

And yet I do not make you go your rounds in the open air like him, nor shout loudly and rend your sides: but in your closet itself, or in your bedchamber, bend your knees, and entreat your Lord. Why did Christ Himself pass a whole night on the mountain? Was it not, that He might be an ensample to us? Then is it that the plants respire, in the night, I mean: and then also does the soul take in the dew even more than they. What the sun has parched by day becomes cool again at night.

More refreshing than all dew, the tears of the night descend upon our lusts and upon all heat and fever of the soul, and do not let it be affected in any such way. But if it do not enjoy the benefit of that dew, it will be burnt up in the daytime. But God forbid (it should be so)! Rather, may we all, being refreshed, and enjoying the mercy of God, be freed from the burden of our sins, through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father together with the Holy Spirit be glory, might, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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