

# Homily 38 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

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*St. John Chrysostom's Homily 38 emphasizes the need for repentance and understanding of the true God amidst the idolatry of Athens.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 48:16, Job 2:10, Psalm 50:13, Acts 17:16-30, Romans 14:9, 2 Corinthians 5:10

**Topics:** "Repentance And Judgment", "Gods Providence"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches about Paul's experiences in Athens, highlighting his encounters with idolatry, Jews, and philosophers. Paul's boldness in proclaiming Jesus and the Resurrection to the Athenians, despite their misunderstandings, demonstrates the need for repentance and the judgment to come. Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of recognizing God's hand in our lives through specific instances of protection and deliverance, urging listeners to remember and be thankful for God's mercy and providence.

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## Transcript

Acts XVII. 16, 17

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

Observe how he meets with greater trials among the Jews than among the Gentiles. Thus in Athens he undergoes nothing of this kind; the thing goes as far as ridicule, and there an end: and yet he did make some converts: whereas among the Jews he underwent many perils; so much greater was their hostility against him.-- His spirit, it says, was roused within him when he saw the city all full of idols. Nowhere else were so many objects of worship to be seen. But again he disputed with the Jews in the synagogue, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

Then certain of the philosophers of the Stoics and Epicureans encountered him. Acts 17:18 It is a wonder the philosophers did not laugh him to scorn, speaking in the way he did. And some said, What does this babbler mean to say? insolently, on the instant: -- this is far from philosophy. Other some said, He seems to be a setter forth of strange gods, from the preaching, because he had no arrogance. They did not understand, nor comprehend the subjects he was speaking of -- how should they? affirming as they did, some of them, that God is a body; others, that pleasure is the (true) happiness.

Of strange gods, because he preached unto them Jesus and the Resurrection: for in fact they supposed Anastasis (the Resurrection) to be some deity, being accustomed to worship female divinities also. And having taken him, they brought him to the Areopagus Acts 17:19-- not to punish, but in order to learn -- to the Areopagus where the trials for murder were held. Thus observe, in hope of learning (they ask him), saying, May we know what is this new doctrine spoken of by you? For you bring certain strange matters to our ears Acts 17:20: everywhere novelty is the charge: we would fain know therefore, what these things may mean.

It was a city of talkers, that city of theirs. For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing. Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars hill, and said, You men of Athens, I look upon you as being in all things (v. 21, 22)-- he puts it by way of encomium: (the word) does not seem to mean anything offensive -- δεισιδαιμονεστ<sup>■</sup>ρους, that is, ε<sup>■</sup>λαβεστ<sup>■</sup>ρους, more religiously disposed. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with his inscription, To an Unknown God.

What therefore ye ignorantly worship, this declare I unto you. Acts 17:23-- On which was inscribed, To an Unknown God. The Athenians, namely, as on many occasions they had received gods from foreign parts also -- for instance, the temple of Minerva, Pan, and others from different countries -- being afraid that there might be some other god not yet known to them, but worshipped elsewhere, for more assurance, forsooth, erected an altar to that god also: and as the god was not known, it was inscribed, To an Unknown God.

This God then, he tells them, is Christ; or rather, the God of all. Him declare I unto you. Observe how he shows that they had already received Him, and it is nothing strange, says he, nothing new that I introduce to you. All along, this was what they had been saying: What is this new doctrine spoken of by you? For you bring certain strange matters to our ears. Immediately therefore he removes this surmise of theirs: and then says, God that made the world and all things therein, He being Lord of heaven and earth -- for, that they may not imagine Him to be one of many, he presently sets them right on this point; adding, dwells not in temples made with hands Acts 17:24, neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed anything -- do you observe how, little by little, he brings in the philosophy?

How he ridicules the heathen error? seeing it is He that gives to all life, and breath, and all things; and has made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth. This is peculiar to God. Look, then, whether these things may not be predicated of the Son also. Being Lord, he says, of heaven and earth -- which they accounted to be God's. Both the creation he declares to be His work, and mankind also. Having determined, he says, the times assigned to them, and the bounds of their habitation, (v. 25, 26), that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us: for in Him we live, and move, and have our being: as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also His offspring. (v. 27, 28.)

This is said by Aratus the poet. Observe how he draws his arguments from things done by themselves, and from sayings of their own. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art. Acts 17:29 And yet for this reason we ought. By no means: for surely we are not like (to such), nor are these souls of ours. And imagination of man. How so? \* \* But some person might say, We do not think this. But it was to the many that he was addressing himself, not now to Philosophy.

How then did they think so unworthily of Him? Again, putting it upon their ignorance, he says, Now the times of ignorance God overlooked. Having agitated their minds by the fear, he then adds this: and yet he says, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent. Acts 17:30 Because He has appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom He has ordained; whereof He has given assurance unto all men, in that He has raised Him from the dead. Acts 17:31 But let us look over again what has been said.

(Recapitulation.) (b) And while Paul waited, etc. Acts 17:16 It is providentially ordered that against his will he stays there, while waiting for those others. (a) His spirit, it says, within him παρωξήνετο . It does not mean there anger or exasperation: just as elsewhere it says, There was παροξυσμός between them. Acts 15:30 (c) Then what is παρωξήνετο? Was roused: for the gift is far removed from anger and exasperation. He could not bear it, but pined away. He reasoned therefore in the synagogue, etc.

Acts 17:17 Observe him again reasoning with Jews. By devout persons he means the proselytes. For the Jews were dispersed everywhere before (mod. text since) Christ's coming, the Law indeed being henceforth, so to say, in process of dissolution, but at the same time (the dispersed Jews) teaching men religion. But those prevailed nothing, save only that they got witnesses of their own calamities. (e) And certain philosophers, etc. Acts 17:18 How came they to be willing to confer with him? (They did it) when they saw others reasoning, and the man having repute (in the encounter).

And observe straightway with overbearing insolence, some said, What would this babblers say? For the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit. 1 Corinthians 2:14 Other some, He seems to be a setter-forth of strange deities: δαίμωνων, for so they called their gods. And having taken him, they brought him, etc. Acts 17:19 (a) The Athenians no longer enjoyed their own laws, but had become subject to the Romans. (g) (Then) why did they hale him to the Areopagus? Meaning to overawe him -- (the place) where they held the trials for bloodshed.

May we know, what is this new doctrine spoken of by you? For you bring certain strange things to our ears; we would fain know therefore what these things mean. For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing. (v. 20, 21.) Here the thing noted is, that though ever occupied only in this telling and hearing, yet they thought those things strange -- things which they had never heard. Then Paul standing in the midst of the Areopagus said, You men of Athens, I look upon you as being in all things more religiously disposed Acts 17:22: (f) for the cities were full of gods (δαίμωνων, al. εδύλων): (h) this is why he says δεισιδαιμονεστῶν .

For as I passed by and viewed the objects of your worship -- he does not say simply τούς δαίμονας (the demons, or deities), but paves the way for his discourse: I beheld an altar, etc. Acts 17:23 This is why he says, I look upon you as being more religiously disposed, viz. because of the altar. God, he says, that made the world. Acts 17:24 He uttered one word, by which he has subverted all the (doctrines) of the philosophers. For the Epicureans affirm all to be fortuitously formed and (by concurrence) of atoms, the Stoics held it to be body and fire (κτερωσιν).

The world and all that is therein. Do you mark the conciseness, and in conciseness, clearness? Mark what were the things that were strange to them: that God made the world! Things which now any of the most ordinary persons know, these the Athenians and the wise men of the Athenians knew not. Seeing He is Lord of heaven and earth: for if He made them, it is clear that He is Lord. Observe what he affirms to be the note of Deity -- creation. Which attribute the Son also has.

For the Prophets everywhere affirm this, that to create is God's prerogative. Not as those affirm that another is Maker but not Lord, assuming that matter is uncreated. Here now he covertly affirms and establishes his own, while he overthrows their doctrine. Dwells not in temples made with hands. For He does indeed dwell in temples, yet not in such, but in man's soul. He overthrows the corporeal worship. What then? Did He not dwell in the temple at Jerusalem? No indeed: but He wrought therein.

Neither is worshipped by men's hands. Acts 17:25 How then was He worshipped by men's hands among the Jews? Not by hands, but by the understanding. As though He needed anything: since even those (acts of worship) He did not in this sort seek, as having need. Shall I eat, says He, the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Psalm 50:13 Neither is this enough -- the having need of naught -- which he has affirmed: for though this is Divine, yet a further attribute must be added.

Seeing it is He that gives unto all, life and breath and all things. Two proofs of Godhead: Himself to have need of naught, and to supply all things to all men. Produce here Plato (and) all that he has philosophized about God, all that Epicurus has: and all is but trifling to this! Gives, he says, life and breath. Lo, he makes Him the Creator of the soul also, not its begetter. See again how he overthrows the doctrine about matter. And made, he says, of one blood every nation of men to dwell upon all the face of the earth.

Acts 17:26 These things are better than the former: and what an impeachment both of the atoms and of matter, that (creation) is not partial (work), nor the soul of man either. But this, which those say, is not to be Creator. -- But by the mind and understanding He is worshipped. -- It is He that gives, etc. He not the partial (μερικῶν δαίμονες) deities. And all things. It is He, he says.-- How man also came into being. -- First he showed that He dwells not, etc., and then declared that He is not worshipped as though He had need of anything.

If God, He made all: but if He made not, He is not God. Gods that made not heaven and earth, let them perish. He introduces much greater doctrines, though as yet he does not mention the great doctrines; but he discoursed to them as unto children. And these were much greater than those. Creation, Lordship, the having need of naught, authorship of all good -- these he has declared. But how is He worshipped? Say. It is not yet the proper time. What equal to this sublimity? Marvellous is this also -- of one, to have made so many: but also, having made, Himself sustains them (συγκρατεῖ) in being, giving life and breath and all things. (b) And has determined the times appointed, and the bounds of their habitation, that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after Him and find Him.

Acts 17:27 (a) It means either this, that He did not compel them to go about and seek God, but according to the bounds of their habitation: (c) or this, that He determined their seeking God, yet not determined this (to be done) continually, but (determined) certain appointed times (when they should do so): showing now, that not having sought they had found: for since, having sought, they had not found, he shows that God was now as manifest as though He were in the midst of them palpably (ψηλαφούμενος). (e) Though He be not far, he says, from every one of us, but is near to all.

See again the power (or, what it is to be God,) of God. What says he? Not only He gave life and breath and all things, but, as the sum and substance of all, He brought us to the knowledge of Himself, by giving us these things by which we are able to find and to apprehend Him. But we did not wish to find Him, albeit close at hand. Though He be not far from every one of us. Why look now, He is near to all, to every one all the world over! What can be greater than this? See how he makes clear riddance of the parcel deities (τοὺς μερικῶς)!

What say I, afar off? He is so near, that without Him we live not: for in Him we live and move and have our being. Acts 17:28 In him; to put it by way of corporeal similitude, even as it is impossible to be ignorant of the air which is diffused on every side around us, and is not far from every one of us, nay rather, which is in us. (d) For it was not so that there was a heaven in one place, in another none, nor yet (a heaven) at one time, at another none. So that both at every time and at every bound it was possible to find Him.

He so ordered things, that neither by place nor by time were men hindered. For of course even this, if nothing else, of itself was a help to them -- that the heaven is in every place, that it stands in all time. (f) See how (he declares) His Providence, and His upholding power (συγκρατήσιν); the existence of all things from Him, (from Him) their working (τὸ ἐργεῖν), (from Him their preservation) that they perish not. And he does not say, Through Him, but, what was nearer than this, In him.-- That poet said nothing equal to this, For we are His offspring.

He, however, spoke it of Jupiter, but Paul takes it of the Creator, not meaning the same being as he, God forbid! But meaning what is properly predicated of God: just as he spoke of the altar with reference to Him, not to the being whom they worshipped. As much as to say, For certain things are said and done with reference to this (true God), but you know not that they are with reference to Him. For say, of whom would it be properly said, To an Unknown God? Of the Creator, or of the demon?

Manifestly of the Creator: because Him they knew not, but the other they knew. Again, that all things are filled (with the presence)-- of God? Or of Jupiter -- a wretch of a man, a detestable impostor! But Paul said it not in the same sense as he, God forbid! But with quite a different meaning. For he says we are God's offspring, i.e. God's own, His nearest neighbors as it were.

For lest, when he says, Being the offspring of God Acts 17:29, they should again say, You bring certain strange things to our ears, he produces the poet. He does not say, You ought not to think the Godhead like to gold or silver, ye accursed and execrable: but in more lowly sort he says, We ought not. For what (says he)? God is above this? No, he does not say this either: but for the present this -- We ought not to think the Godhead like such, for nothing is so opposite to men. But we do not affirm the Godhead to be like this, for who would say that? Mark how he has introduced the incorporeal (nature of God) when he said, In Him, etc., for the mind, when it surmises body, at the same time implies the notion of distance. (Speaking) to the many he says, We ought not to think the Godhead like gold, or silver, or stone, the shaping of art, for if we are not like to those as regards the soul, much more God (is not like to such). So far, he withdraws them from the notion. But neither is the Godhead, he would say, subjected to any other human conception. For if that which art or thought has found -- this is why he says it thus, of art or imagination of man -- if that, then, which human art or thought has found, is God, then even in the stone (is) God's essence.-- How comes it then, if in Him we live, that we do not find Him? The charge is twofold, both that they did not find Him, and that they found such as these. The (human) understanding in itself is not at all to be relied upon.-- But when he has agitated their soul by showing them to be without excuse, see what he says: The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent. Acts 17:30 What then? Are none of these men to be punished? None of them that are willing to repent. He says it of these men, not of the departed, but of them whom He commands to repent. He does not call you to account, he would say. He does not say, Took no notice (παρεδεν); does not say, Permitted: but, You were ignorant. Overlooked, i.e. does not demand punishment as of men that deserve punishment. You were ignorant. And he does not say, You wilfully did evil; but this he showed by what he said above. -- All men everywhere to repent: again he hints at the whole world. Observe how he takes them off from the parcel deities! Because He has appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by

that Man whom He has ordained, whereof He has given assurance to all men, in that He raised Him from the dead. Acts 17:31 Observe how he again declares the Passion. Observe the terror again: for, that the judgment is true, is clear from the raising Him up: for it is alleged in proof of that. That all he has been saying is true, is clear from the fact that He rose again. For He did give this assurance to all men, His rising from the dead: this (i.e. judgment), also is henceforth certain.

These words were spoken indeed to the Athenians: but it were seasonable that one should say to us also, that all men everywhere must repent, because he has appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world. See how he brings Him in as Judge also: Him, both provident for the world, and merciful and forgiving and powerful and wise, and, in a word possessing all the attributes of a Creator. Having given assurance to all men, i.e. He has given proof in the rising (of Jesus) from the dead.

Let us repent then: for we must assuredly be judged. If Christ rose not, we shall not be judged: but if he rose, we shall without doubt be judged. For to this end, it is said, did He also die, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living. Romans 14:9 For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may receive according to that he has done. 2 Corinthians 5:10 Do not imagine that these are but words. Lo! He introduced also the subject of the resurrection of all men; for in no other way can the world be judged.

And that, In that He has raised Him from the dead, relates to the body: for that was dead, that had fallen. Among the Greeks, as their notions of Creation, so likewise of the Judgment, are children's fancies, ravings of drunken men. But let us, who know these things accurately, do something that is to the purpose: let us be made friends unto God. How long shall we be at enmity with Him? How long shall we entertain dislike towards Him? God forbid! you will say: Why do you say such things?

I would wish not to say the things I say, if you did not do the things ye do: but as things are, what is the use now in keeping silence from words, when the plain evidence of deeds so cries aloud? How then, how shall we love Him? I have told you thousands of ways, thousands of times: but I will speak it also now. One way I seem to myself to have discovered, a very great and admirable way. Namely, after acknowledging to Him our general obligations -- what none shall be able to express (I mean), what has been done for each of us in his own person, of these also let us bethink ourselves, because these are of great force: let each one of us reckon them up with himself, and make diligent search, and as it were in a book let him have the benefits of God written down; for instance, if at any time having fallen into dangers he has escaped the hands of his enemies; if ever having gone out on a journey at an untimely hour, he has escaped danger; if ever, having had an encounter with wicked men, he has got the better of them; or if ever, having fallen into sickness, he has recovered when all had given him over: for this avails much for attaching us to God.

For if that Mordecai, when the services done by him were brought to the king's remembrance, found them to be so available, that he in return rose to that height of splendor Esther 6:2-11: much more we, if we call to mind, and make diligent enquiry of these two points, what sins we have committed against God, and what good He has done to us, shall thus both be thankful, and give Him freely all that is ours. But no one gives a thought to any of these things: but just as regarding our sins we say that we are sinners, while we do not enquire into them specifically, so with regard to God's benefits (we say), that God has done us good, and do not specifically enquire, where, and in how great number and at what time.

But from this time forth let us be very exact in our reckoning. For if any one can recall even those things which happened long ago, let him reckon up all accurately, as one who will find a great treasure. This is

also profitable to us in keeping us from despair. For when we see that he has often protected us, we shall not despair, nor suppose that we are cast off: but we shall take it as a strong pledge of His care for us, when we bethink us how, though we have sinned, we are not punished, but even enjoy protection from Him.

Let me now tell you a case, which I heard from a certain person, in which was a child, and it happened on a time that he was in the country with his mother, being not yet fifteen years old. Just then there came a bad air, in consequence of which a fever attacked them both, for in fact it was the autumn season. It happened that the mother succeeded in getting into the town before (they could stop her); but the boy, when the physicians on the spot ordered him, with the fever burning within him, to gargle his throat, resisted, having forsooth his own wise view of the matter, and thinking he should be better able to quench the fire, if he took nothing whatever, therefore, in his unseasonable spirit of opposition, boy-like, he would take nothing.

But when he came into the town, his tongue was paralyzed, and he was for a long time speechless, so that he could pronounce nothing articulately; however, he could read indeed, and attended masters for a long time, but that was all, and there was nothing to mark his progress. So all his hopes (in life) were cut off, and his mother was full of grief: and though the physicians suggested many plans, and many others did so too, yet nobody was able to do him any good, until the merciful God loosed the string of his tongue cf.

Mark 7:35, and then he recovered, and was restored to his former readiness and distinctness of speech. His mother also related, that when a very little child, he had an affection in the nose, which they call a polypus: and then too the physicians had given him over and his father cursed him (for the father was then living), and (even) his mother prayed for him to die; and all was full of distress. But he on a sudden having coughed, owing to the collection of mucus, by the force of the breath expelled the creature (τῷ θηρῶν) from his nostrils, and all the danger was removed.

But this evil having been extinguished, an acrid and viscid running from the eyes formed such a thick gathering of the humors (τῷ λύμας), that it was like a skin drawn over the pupil, and what was worse, it threatened blindness, and everybody said this would be the issue. But from this disease also was he quickly freed by the grace of God. So far what I have heard from others: now I will tell you what I myself know. Once on a time a suspicion of tyrants was raised in our city -- at that time I was but a youth -- and all the soldiers being set to watch without the city as it chanced, they were making strict inquisition after books of sorcery and magic.

And the person who had written the book, had flung it unbound (κατασκύλαστον) into the river, and was taken, and when asked for it, was not able to give it up, but was carried all around the city in bonds: when, however, the evidence being brought home to him, he had suffered punishment, just then it chanced that I, wishing to go to the Martyrs' Church, was returning through the gardens by the riverside in company with another person. He, seeing the book floating on the water at first thought it was a linen cloth, but when he got near, perceived it was a book, so he went down, and took it up.

I however called shares in the booty, and laughed about it. But let us see, says he, what in the world it is. So he turns back a part of the page, and finds the contents to be magic. At that very moment it chanced that a soldier came by: \* \* \* then having taken from within, he went off. There were we congealed with fear. For who would have believed our story that we had picked it up from the river, when all were at that

time, even the unsuspected, under strict watch? And we did not dare to cast it away, lest we should be seen, and there was a like danger to us in tearing it to pieces.

God gave us means, and we cast it away, and at last we were free for that time from the extreme peril. And I might mention numberless cases, if I had a mind to recount all. And even these I have mentioned for your sakes, so that, if any have other cases, although not such as these, let him bear them in mind constantly: for example, if at any time a stone having been hurled, and being about to strike you, has not struck you, do thou bear this ever in your mind: these things produce in us great affection towards God.

For if on remembering any men who have been the means of saving us, we are much mortified if we be not able to requite them, much more (should we feel thus) with regard to God. This too is useful in other respects. When we wish not to be overmuch grieved, let us say: If we have received good things at the hand of the Lord, shall not we endure evil things? Job 2:10 And when Paul told them from whence he had been delivered, 2 Timothy 4:17 the reason was that he might put them also in mind.

See too how Jacob kept all these things in his mind: wherefore also he said: The Angel which redeemed me from my youth up Genesis 48:16; and not only that he redeemed him, but how and for what purpose. See accordingly how he also calls to mind the benefits he had received in particular. With my staff, he says, I passed over Jordan. Genesis 32:10 The Jews also always remembered the things which happened to their forefathers, turning over in their minds the things done in Egypt.

Then much more let us, bearing in mind the special mercies which have happened to us also, how often we have fallen into dangers and calamities, and unless God had held his hand over us, should long ago have perished: I say, let us all, considering these things and recounting them day by day, return our united thanks all of us to God, and never cease to glorify Him, that so we may receive a large recompense for our thankfulness of heart, through the grace and compassion of His only begotten Son, with Whom to the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, might, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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