

Homily 7 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's homily emphasizes the fulfillment of prophecy in Christ's birth and the importance of sincere worship as demonstrated by the wise men.

Scripture: Matthew 2:4-5, 1 Corinthians 7:4, 1 Corinthians 11:27, 1 Corinthians 14:34, 1 Timothy 4:2

Topics: "Christ's Divinity", "Christian Living"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the significance of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, emphasizing how even the enemies of the truth unwittingly contributed to the fulfillment of prophecies and the revelation of Christ's divinity. He highlights the contrast between the wise men's reverence and the Jews' indifference, urging the congregation to emulate the magi's dedication in seeking and worshipping Christ. Chrysostom warns against the dangers of succumbing to worldly temptations, particularly the lure of immoral entertainment like the theater, and calls for a life of chastity, decency, and devotion to Christ, regardless of one's marital status or occupation.

Transcript

Matthew 2:4-5.

And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said to him, in Bethlehem of Judæa.

Do you see how all things are done to convict the Jews? How, as long as He was out of their sight, the envy had not yet laid hold of them, and they rehearsed the testimonies of Him with truth; but when they saw the glory that arose from the miracles, a grudging spirit possessed them, and thenceforth they betrayed the truth.

However, the truth was exalted by all things, and strength was the more gathered for it even by its enemies. See for example in this very case, how wonderful and beyond expectation are the results secretly provided for. For both the barbarians and the Jews do the same time alike learn something more of one another, and teach one another. Thus the Jews, for their part, heard from the wise men, that a star also had proclaimed Him in the land of the Persians; the wise men, in their turn, were informed by the Jews that this Man, whom the star proclaimed, prophets also had made known from a long time of old. And the ground of their inquiry was made to both an occasion of setting forth clearer and more perfect instruction; and the enemies of the truth are compelled even against their will to read the writings in favor

of the truth, and to interpret the prophecy; although not all of it. For having spoken of Bethlehem, and how that out of it He shall come that should rule Israel, they proceed not afterwards to add what follows, out of flattery to the king. And what was this? That His goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.

2. But why, one may say, if He was to come from thence, did He live in Nazareth after the birth, and obscure the prophecy? Nay, He did not obscure it, but unfolded it the more. For the fact, that while His mother had her constant residence in the one place, He was born in the other, shows the thing to have been done by a Divine dispensation.

And for this cause, let me add, neither did He remove from thence straightway after His birth, but abode forty days, giving opportunity to them that were disposed to be inquisitive to examine all things accurately. Because there were in truth many things to move them to such an inquiry, at least if they had been disposed to give heed to them. Thus at the coming of the wise men the whole city was in a flutter, and together with the city the king, and the prophet was brought forward, and a court of high authority was summoned; and many other things too were done there, all which Luke relates minutely. Such were what concerns Anna, and Simeon, and Zacharias, and the angels, and the shepherds; all which things were to the attentive sufficient to give hints for ascertaining what had taken place. For if the wise men, who came from Persia, were not ignorant of the place, much more might they, whose abode it was, acquaint themselves with these things.

He manifested Himself then from the beginning by many miracles, but when they would not see, He hid Himself for a while, to be again revealed from another more glorious beginning. For it was no longer the wise men, nor the star, but the Father from above that proclaimed Him at the streams of Jordan; and the Spirit likewise came upon Him, guiding that voice to the head of Him just baptized; and John, with all plainness of speech, cried out everywhere in Judæa, till inhabited and waste country alike were filled with that kind of doctrine; and the witness too of the miracles, and earth, and sea, and the whole creation, uttered in His behalf a distinct voice. But at the time of the birth, just so many things happened as were fitted quietly to mark out Him that had come. Thus, in order that the Jews might not say, We know not when He was born, nor whereabouts, both all these events in which the wise men were concerned were brought about by God's providence, and the rest of the things which we have mentioned; so that they would have no excuse to plead, for not having inquired into that which had come to pass.

But mark also the exactness of the prophecy. For it does not say, He will abide in Bethlehem, but He will come out thence. So that this too was a subject of prophecy, His being simply born there.

Some of them, however, being past shame, say that these things were spoken of Zerubbabel. But how can they be right? For surely his goings forth were not from of old, from everlasting. Micah 5:2 And how can that suit him which is said at the beginning, Out of you shall He come forth: Zorobabel not having been born in Judæa, but in Babylon, whence also he was called Zorobabel, because he had his origin there? And as many as know the Syrians' language know what I say.

And together with what has been said, all the time also since these things is sufficient to establish the testimony. For what says he? You are not the least among the princes of Judah, and he adds the cause of the pre-eminence, saying, out of you shall He come. But no one else has made that place illustrious or eminent, excepting Him alone. For example: since that birth, men come from the ends of the earth to see the manger, and the site of the shed. And this the prophet foretold aloud from the first, saying, You are not the least among the princes of Judah; that is, among the heads of tribes. By which expression he

comprehended even Jerusalem. But not even so have they given heed, although the advantage passes on to themselves. Yea, and because of this the prophets at the beginning discourse nowhere so much of His dignity, as touching the benefit which accrued to them by Him. For so, when the Virgin was bearing the child, he says, You shall call His name Jesus; Matthew 1:21 and he gives the reason saying, for He shall save His people from their sins. And the wise men too said not, Where is the Son of God? but He that is born King of the Jews. And here again it is not affirmed, Out of you shall come forth the Son of God, but a Governor, that shall feed my people Israel. For it was needful to converse with them at first, setting out in a tone of very exceeding condescension, lest they should be offended; and to preach what related to their salvation in particular, that hereby they might be the rather won over. At any rate, all the testimonies that are first cited, and for which it was the season immediately at the time of the birth, say nothing great, nor lofty concerning Him, nor such as those subsequent to the manifestation of the miracles; for these discourse more distinctly concerning His dignity. For instance, when after many miracles children were singing hymns unto Him, hear what says the prophet, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings You have perfected praise. And again, I will consider the Heavens, the works of Your fingers; which signifies Him to be Maker of the universe. And the testimony too, which was produced after the ascension, manifests His equality with the Father; thus saying, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit on my right hand. And Isaiah too says, He that rises up to rule over the Gentiles, in Him shall the Gentiles trust.

But how says he that Bethlehem is not the least among the princes of Judah? for not in Palestine alone, but in the whole world, the village has become conspicuous. Why, so far he was speaking to Jews; wherefore also he added, He shall feed my people Israel. And yet He fed the whole world; but as I have said, He is fain not to offend as yet, by revealing what He has to say touching the Gentiles.

But how was it, one may say, that He did not feed the Jewish people? I answer, first, this too is accomplished: for by the term Israel in this place, he figuratively meant such as believed on Him from among the Jews. And Paul interpreting this, says, For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel, Romans 9:6 but as many as have been born by faith and promise. And if He did not feed them all, this is their own fault and blame. For when they ought to have worshipped with the wise men, and have glorified God that such a time had come, doing away all their sins (for not a word was spoken to them of judgments set, or of accounts to be given, but of a mild and meek Shepherd); they for their part do just the contrary, and are troubled, and make disturbance, and go on continually framing plots without end.

3. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared: Matthew 2:7

Attempting to slay that which was born -- an act of extreme idiotcy not of madness only; since what had been said and done was enough to have withholden him from any such attempt. For those occurrences were not after the manner of man. A star, I mean, calling the wise men from on high; and barbarians making so long a pilgrimage, to worship Him that lay in swaddling clothes and a manger; and prophets too from of old, proclaiming beforehand all this -- these and all the rest were more than human events: but nevertheless, none of these things restrained him. For such a thing is wickedness. It falls foul of itself, and is ever attempting impossibilities. And mark his utter folly. If on the one hand he believed the prophecy, and accounted it to be unchangeable, it was quite clear that he was attempting impossibilities; if again he disbelieved, and did not expect that those sayings would come to pass, he need not have been in fear and alarm, nor have formed any plot on that behalf. So that in either way his craft was superfluous.

And this too came of the utmost folly, to think that the wise men would make more account of him than of the Child that was born, for the sake of which they had come so long a journey. For if, before they saw, they were so inflamed with longing for Him; after they had seen with their eyes, and been confirmed by the prophecy, how hoped he to persuade them to betray the young Child to him?

Nevertheless, many as were the reasons to withhold him, he made the attempt; and having privily called the wise men, he inquired of them. Because he thought that Jews would be concerned in favor of the Child, and he never could expect that they would fall away unto such madness as to be willing to give up to His enemies their Protector and Saviour, and Him who had come for the deliverance of their nation. On account of this he both calls them privily, and seeks the time not of the Child, but of the star: thereby marking out the object of his chase so as to include far more than it. For the star, I think, must have appeared a long time before. It was a long time which the wise men had to spend on their journey. In order, therefore, that they might present themselves just after His birth (it being meet for Him to be worshipped in His very swaddling clothes, that the marvellous and strange nature of the thing might appear), the star, a long time before, makes itself visible. Whereas if at the moment of His birth in Palestine, and not before, it had been seen by them in the East, they, consuming a long time in their journey, would not have seen Him in swaddling clothes on their arrival. As to his slaying the children from two years old and under, let us not marvel; for his wrath and dread, for the sake of a fuller security, added very much to the time, so that not one might escape.

Having therefore called them, he says, Go and search diligently for the young Child; and when you have found Him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship Him also. Matthew 2:8

Do you see his extreme folly? Why, if you say these things in sincerity, wherefore do you inquire privily? But if intending to plot against Him, how is it you do not perceive, that from the fact of their being asked secretly the wise men will be able to perceive your craft? But as I have already said, a soul taken captive by any wickedness becomes more utterly senseless than any thing.

And he said not, go and learn concerning the King, but concerning the young Child; for he could not even endure to call Him by the name of His dominion.

4. But the wise men perceive nothing of this, by reason of their exceeding reverence (for they never could have expected that he could have gone on to so great wickedness, and would have attempted to form plots against a dispensation so marvellous): and they depart suspecting none of these things, but from what was in themselves auguring all that would be in the rest of mankind.

And, lo! The star, which they saw in the east, went before them. Matthew 2:9

For therefore only was it hidden, that having lost their guide, they might come to be obliged to make inquiry of the Jews, and so the matter might be made evident to all. Since after they have made inquiries, and have had His enemies for informants, it appears to them again. And mark how excellent was the order; how in the first place after the star the people of the Jews receives them, and the king, and these bring in the prophecy to explain what had appeared: how next, after the prophet, an angel again took them up and taught them all things; but for a time they journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem by the guidance of the star, the star again journeying with them from that place also; that hence too you might learn, that this was not one of the ordinary stars, for there is not so much as one star that has this nature. And it not merely moved, but went before them, drawing and guiding them on in mid-day.

But what need of this star any more, one may ask, when the place was ascertained? In order that the Child also might be seen. For there was not anything to make Him manifest, since the house was not conspicuous, neither was His mother glorious, or distinguished. There was need then of the star, to set them by the place. Wherefore it re-appears on their coming out of Jerusalem, and stays not, before it has reached the manger.

And marvel was linked on to marvel; for both were strange things, as well the magi worshipping, as the star going before them; and enough to attract even such as were made all of stone. For if the wise men had said, they had heard prophets say these things, or that angels had discoursed with them in private, they might have been disbelieved; but now, when the vision of the star appeared on high, even they that were exceeding shameless had their mouths stopped.

Moreover, the star, when it stood over the young Child, stayed its course again: which thing itself also was of a greater power than belongs to a star, now to hide itself, now to appear, and having appeared to stand still. Hence they too received an increase of faith. For this cause they rejoiced also, that they had found what they were seeking, that they had proved messengers of truth, that not without fruit had they come so great a journey; so great a longing (so to speak) had they for Christ. For first it came and stood over His very head, showing that what is born is Divine; next standing there, it leads them to worship Him; being not simply barbarians, but the wiser sort among them.

Do you see, with how great fitness the star appeared? Why; because even after the prophecy, and after the interpretation of the chief priests and scribes, they still had their minds turned towards it.

5. Shame upon Marcion, shame upon Paul of Samosata, for refusing to see what those wise men saw -- the forefathers of the Church; for I am not ashamed so to call them. Let Marcion be ashamed, beholding God worshipped in the flesh. Let Paul be ashamed, beholding Him worshipped as not being merely a man. As to His being in the flesh, that first is signified by the swaddling clothes and the manger; as to their not worshipping Him as a mere man, they declare it, by offering Him, at that unripe age, such gifts as were meet to be offered to God. And together with them let the Jews also be ashamed, seeing themselves anticipated by barbarians and magi, while they submit not so much as to come after them. For indeed what happened then was a type of the things to come, and from the very beginning it was shown that the Gentiles would anticipate their nation.

But how was it, one may ask, that not at the beginning, but afterwards, He said, 'Go, and make disciples of all nations'? Because the occurrence was a type, as I said, of the future, and a sort of declaration of it beforehand. For the natural order was that Jews should come unto Him first; but forasmuch as they of their own choice gave up their proper benefit, the order of things was inverted. Since not even in this instance should the wise men have come before the Jews, nor should persons from so great a distance have anticipated those who were settled about the very city, nor should those who had heard nothing have prevented them that were nurtured in so many prophecies. But because they were exceedingly ignorant of their own blessings, those from Persia anticipate those at Jerusalem. And this indeed is what Paul also says: It was necessary that the word of the Lord should first have been spoken to you, but seeing you have judged yourselves unworthy, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. Acts 13:46 For even though before they did not obey, at any rate when they heard it from the wise men, they ought to have made all haste; but they would not. Therefore, while those are slumbering, these run before.

6. Let us then also follow the magi, let us separate ourselves from our barbarian customs, and make our distance therefrom great, that we may see Christ, since they too, had they not been far from their own country, would have missed seeing Him. Let us depart from the things of earth. For so the wise men, while they were in Persia, saw but the star, but after they had departed from Persia, they beheld the Sun of Righteousness. Or rather, they would not have seen so much as the star, unless they had readily risen up from thence. Let us then also rise up; though all men be troubled, let us run to the house of the young Child; though kings, though nations, though tyrants interrupt this our path, let not our desire pass away. For so shall we thoroughly repel all the dangers that beset us. Since these too, except they had seen the young Child, would not have escaped their danger from the king. Before seeing the young Child, fears and dangers and troubles pressed upon them from every side; but after the adoration, it is calm and security; and no longer a star but an angel receives them, having become priests from the act of adoration; for we see that they offered gifts also.

Therefore likewise leave the Jewish people, the troubled city, the bloodthirsty tyrant, the pomp of the world, and hasten to Bethlehem, where is the Acts 13:46 house of the spiritual Bread. For though you be a shepherd, and come hither, you will behold the young Child in an inn: though you be a king, and approach not here, your purple robe will profit you nothing; though you be one of the wise men, this will be no hindrance to you; only let your coming be to honor and adore, not to spurn the Son of God; only do this with trembling and joy: for it is possible for both of these to concur in one.

But take heed that you be not like Herod, and say, that I may come and worship Him, and when you have come, be minded to slay Him. For him do they resemble, who partake of the mysteries unworthily: it being said, that such a one shall be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord. 1 Corinthians 11:27 Yes; for they have in themselves the tyrant who is grieved at Christ's kingdom, him that is more wicked than Herod of old, even Mammon. For he would fain have the dominion, and sends them that are his own to worship in appearance, but slaying while they worship. Let us fear then, lest at any time, while we have the appearance of suplicants and worshippers, we should in deed show forth the contrary.

And let us cast everything out of our hands when we are to worship; though it be gold that we have, let us offer it unto him and not bury it. For if those barbarians then offered it for honor, what will become of you, not giving even to Him that has need? If those men journeyed so far to see Him newly born, what sort of excuse will you have, not going out of your way one alley's length, that you may visit Him sick or in bonds? And yet when they are sick or in bonds, even our enemies have our pity; yours is denied even to your Benefactor and Lord. And they offered gold, you hardly give bread. They saw the star and were glad, you, seeing Christ Himself a stranger and naked, are not moved.

For which of you, for Christ's sake, has made so long a pilgrimage, you that have received countless benefits, as these barbarians, or rather, these wiser than the wisest philosophers? And why say I, so long a journey? Nay, many of our women are so delicate, that they go not over so much as one crossing of the streets to behold Him on the spiritual manger, unless they can have mules to draw them. And others being able to walk, yet prefer to their attendance here, some a crowd of worldly business, some the theatres. Whereas the barbarians accomplished so great a journey for His sake, before seeing Him; you do not emulate them even after you have seen Him, but forsake Him after seeing Him, and run to see the stage player. (For I touch again on the same subjects, as I did also of late.) And seeing Christ lying in the manger, you leave Him, that you may see women on the stage.

7. What thunderbolts do not these things deserve? For tell me, if any one were to lead you into a palace, and show you the king on his throne, would you indeed choose to see the theatre instead of those things? And yet even in the palace there is nothing to gain; but here a spiritual well of fire gushes up out of this table. And you leave this, and run down to the theatre, to see women swimming, and nature put to open dishonor, leaving Christ sitting by the well? Yes: for now, as of old, He sits down by the well, not discoursing to a Samaritan woman, but to a whole city. Or perchance now too with a Samaritan woman only. For neither now is any one with Him; but some with their bodies only, and some not even with these. But nevertheless, He retires not, but remains, and asks of us to drink, not water, but holiness, for His holy things He gives unto the holy. For it is not water that He gives us from this fountain, but living blood; and it is indeed a symbol of death, but it has become the cause of life.

But you, leaving the fountain of blood, the awful cup, go your way unto the fountain of the devil, to see a harlot swim, and to suffer shipwreck of the soul. For that water is a sea of lasciviousness, not drowning bodies, but working shipwreck of souls. And whereas she swims with naked body, you beholding, are sunk into the deep of lasciviousness. For such is the devil's net; it sinks, not them that go down into the water itself, but them that sit above more than such as wallow therein; and it chokes them more grievously than Pharaoh, who was of old sunk in the sea with his horses and his chariots. And if souls could but be seen, I could show you many floating on these waters, like the bodies of the Egyptians at that time. But what is still more grievous is this, that they even call such utter destruction a delight, and they term the sea of perdition a channel for a pleasure voyage. Yet surely one might easier pass over in safety the Ægean or the Tuscan sea, than this spectacle. For in the first place, through a whole night the devil preoccupies their souls with the expectation of it; then having shown them the expected object, he binds them at once, and makes them captives. For think not, because you have not been joined unto the harlot, you are clean from the sin; for in the purpose of your heart you have done it all. Since if you be taken by lust, you have kindled the flame up higher; if you feel nothing at what you see, you deserve a heavier charge, for being a scandal to others, by encouraging them in these spectacles, and for polluting your own eye-sight, and together with your eye-sight, your soul.

However, not merely to find fault, come let us devise a mode of correction too. What then will the mode be? I would commit you to your own wives, that they may instruct you. It is true, according to Paul's law, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 you ought to be the teachers. But since that order is reversed by sin, and the body has come to be above, and the head beneath, let us even take this way.

But if you are ashamed to have a woman for your teacher, fly from sin, and you will quickly be able to mount up on the throne which God has given you. Since so long as you sin the Scripture sends you not to a woman only, but even to things irrational, and those of the viler sort; yea, it is not ashamed to send you who art honored with reason, as a disciple to the ant. Proverbs 6:6 Plainly this is no charge against the Scripture, but against them that so betray their own nobility of race. This then we will do likewise; and for the present we will commit you to your wife; but if you despise her, we will send you away to the school of the very brutes, and will point out to you how many birds, fishes, four-footed beasts, and creeping things are found more honorable, and chaster than you.

If now you are ashamed, and dost blush at the comparison, mount up to your own nobility, and fly the sea of hell, and the flood of fire, I mean the pool in the theatre. For this pool introduces to that sea, and kindles that abyss of flame. Since if he that looks on a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery, Matthew 5:28 he who is forced even to see her naked, how does he not become ten thousandfold a captive? The flood in the days of Noah did not so utterly destroy the race of men as these swimming

women drown all that are there with great disgrace. For as to that rain, though it wrought indeed a death of the body, yet did it repress the wickedness of the soul; but this has the contrary effect; while the bodies remain, it destroys the soul. And ye, when there is a question of precedence, claim to take place of the whole word, forasmuch as our city first crowned itself with the name of Christian; but in the competition of chastity, you are not ashamed to be behind the rudest cities.

8. Well, says one, and what do you require us to do? To occupy the mountains, and become monks? Why it is this which makes me sigh, that you think them alone to be properly concerned with decency and chastity; and yet assuredly Christ made His laws common to all. Thus, when He says, if any one look on a woman to lust after her, He speaks not to the solitary, but to him also that has a wife; since in fact that mount was at that time filled with all kinds of persons of that description. Form then in your mind an image of that amphitheatre, and hate this, which is the devil's. Neither condemn the severity of my speech. For I neither forbid to marry, 1 Timothy 4:2 nor hinder your taking pleasure; but I would have this be done in chastity, not with shame, and reproach, and imputations without end. I do not make it a law that you are to occupy the mountains and the deserts, but to be good and considerate and chaste, dwelling in the midst of the city. For in fact all our laws are common to the monks also, except marriage; yea rather, even with respect to this, Paul commands us to put ourselves altogether on a level with them; saying, For the fashion of this world passes away: that they that have wives be as though they had none.

Wherefore (so he speaks) I do not bid you take possession of the summits of the mountains; it is true I could wish it, since the cities imitate the things that were done in Sodom; nevertheless, I do not enforce this. Abide, having house and children and wife; only do not insult your wife, nor put your children to shame, neither bring into your house the infection from the theatre. Do you not hear Paul saying, The husband has not power of his own body, but the wife, 1 Corinthians 7:4 and setting down laws common to both? But you, if your wife be continually thrusting herself into a public assembly, art severe in blaming her; but yourself, spending whole days on public shows, you do not account worthy of blame. Yea, touching your wife's modesty you are so strict as even to go beyond necessity or measure, and not to allow her so much as indispensable absences; but to yourself you deem all things lawful. Yet Paul allows you not, who gives the wife likewise the same authority, for thus he speaks: Let the husband render unto the wife due honor. What sort of honor then is this, when you insult her in the chiefest things, and give up her body to harlots (for your body is hers); when you bring tumults and wars into your house, when you do in the market place such things, as being related by yourself to your wife at home, overwhelm her with shame, and put to shame also your daughter if present, and more than them, surely, yourself? For you must necessarily either be silent, or behave yourself so unseemly, that it would be just for your very servants to be scourged for it. What plea then will you have, I pray you, beholding, as you do, with great eagerness, things which even to name is disgraceful; preferring to all sights these, which even to recount is intolerable?

Now then for a season, in order not to be too burdensome, I will here bring my discourse to an end. But if you continue in the same courses, I will make the knife sharper, and the cut deeper; and I will not cease, till I have scattered the theatre of the devil, and so purified the assembly of the Church. For in this way we shall both be delivered from the present disgrace, and shall reap the fruit of the life to come, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might for ever and ever. Amen.

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