

Homily 9 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 9 on Matthew explores the themes of divine providence, the nature of suffering, and the fulfillment of prophecy amidst human cruelty.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 5:5

Topics: "Suffering And Faith", "Earthly Vs Heavenly"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the tragic events surrounding Herod's anger and the massacre of the innocent children in Bethlehem, highlighting the cruelty and senselessness of Herod's actions driven by envy and anger. He explains that the suffering of the innocent children served a greater purpose, either to atone for sins or to receive heavenly rewards, emphasizing the importance of enduring suffering with faith and virtue. Chrysostom urges the listeners to focus on heavenly treasures rather than earthly riches, warning against the dangers of being enslaved by material wealth and the insatiable desire for possessions.

Transcript

Matt. II. 16.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding angry.

Yet surely it was a case not for anger, but for fear and awe: he ought to have perceived that he was attempting impossible things. But he is not refrained. For when a soul is insensible and incurable, it yields to none of the medicines given by God. See for example this man following up his former efforts, and adding many murders to one, and hurried down the steep any whither. For driven wild by this anger, and envy, as by some demon, he takes account of nothing, but rages even against nature herself, and his anger against the wise men who had mocked him he vents upon the children that had done no wrong: venturing then in Palestine upon a deed akin to the things that had been done in Egypt. For he sent forth, it is said, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.

Here attend to me carefully. Because many things are uttered by many very idly touching these children, and the course of events is charged with injustice, and some of these express their perplexity about it in a more moderate way, others with more of audaciousness and frenzy. In order then that we may free these of their madness and those of their perplexity, suffer us to discourse a little upon this topic. Plainly, then, if

this be their charge, that the children were left to be slain, they should find fault likewise with the slaughter of the soldiers that kept Peter. Acts 12:19 For as here, when the young child had fled, other children are massacred in the place of Him who was sought; even so then, too, Peter having been delivered from his prison and chains by the angel, one of like name with this tyrant, and like temper too, when he had sought him, and found him not, slew instead of him the soldiers that kept him.

But what is this? it may be said; why this is not a solution, but an enhancement of our difficulty. I know it too, and for this intent I bring forward all such cases, that to all I may adduce one and the same solution. What then is the solution of these things? Or what fair account of them can we give? That Christ was not the cause of their slaughter, but the king's cruelty; as indeed neither was Peter to those others, but the madness of Herod. For if he had seen the wall broken through, or the doors overthrown, he might, perhaps, have had ground to accuse the soldiers that kept the apostle, of neglect; but now when all things continued in due form, and the doors were thrown wide open, and the chains fastened to the hands of them that kept him (for in fact they were bound unto him), he might have inferred from these things (that is, if he had been strictly doing a judge's office on the matters before him), that the event was not of human power or craft, but of some divine and wonder-working power; he might have adored the doer of these things, instead of waging war with the sentinels. For God had so done all that He did, that so far from exposing the keepers, He was by their means leading the king unto the truth. But if he proved senseless, what signifies to the skillful Physician of Souls, managing all things to do good, the insubordination of him that is diseased?

And just this one may say in the present case likewise. For, wherefore are you angry, O Herod, at being mocked of the wise men? Did you not know that the birth was divine? Did you not summon the chief priests? Did you not gather together the scribes? Did not they, being called, bring the prophet also with them into your court of judgment, proclaiming these things beforehand from of old? Did you not see how the old things agreed with the new? Did you not hear that a star also ministered to these men? Did you not reverence the zeal of the barbarians? Did you not marvel at their boldness? Were you not horror-struck at the truth of the prophet? Did you not from the former things perceive the very last also? Wherefore did you not reason with yourself from all these things, that this event was not of the craft of the wise men, but of a Divine Power, duly dispensing all things? And even if you were deceived by the wise men, what is that to the young children, who have done no wrong?

2. Yea, says one, Herod you have full well deprived of excuse, and proved him bloodthirsty; but you have not yet solved the question about the injustice of what took place. For if he did unjustly, wherefore did God permit it? Now, what should we say to this? That which I do not cease to say continually, in church, in the market-place and everywhere; that which I also wish you carefully to keep in mind, for it is a sort of rule for us, suited to every such perplexity. What then is our rule, and what our saying? That although there be many that injure, yet is there not so much as one that is injured. And in order that the riddle may not disturb you too much, I add the solution too with all speed. I mean, that what we may suffer unjustly from any one, it tells either to the doing away of our sins, God so putting that wrong to our account; or unto the recompense of rewards.

And that what I may say may be clearer, let us conduct our argument in the way of illustration. As thus: suppose a certain servant who owes much money to his master, and then that this servant has been spitefully used by unjust men, and robbed of some of his goods. If then the master, in whose power it was to stay the plunderer and wrong doer, should not indeed restore that same property, but should reckon what was taken away towards what was owed him by his servant, is the servant then injured? By

no means. But what if he should repay him even more? Has he not then even gained more than he has lost? Every one, I suppose, perceives it.

Now this same reckoning we are to make in regard of our own sufferings. For as to the fact, that in consideration of what we may suffer wrongfully, we either have sins done away, or receive more glorious crowns, if the amount of our sins be not so great: hear what Paul says concerning him that had committed fornication, Deliver ye such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved. 1 Corinthians 5:5 But what is this? you may say, for the discourse was about them that were injured by others, not about them that are corrected by their teachers. I might answer, that there is no difference; for the question was, whether to suffer evil be not an indignity to the sufferer. But, to bring my argument nearer the very point inquired of; remember David, how, when he saw Shimei at a certain time assailing him, and trampling on his affliction, and pouring on him revilings without end, his captains desiring to slay him, he utterly forbade them, saying, Let him curse, that the Lord may look upon mine abasement, and that he may requite me good for this cursing this day. And in the Psalms too in his chanting, he said, Consider mine enemies, that they are multiplied, and they hate me with unjust hatred, and forgive all my sins. And Lazarus again for the same cause enjoyed remission, having in this life suffered innumerable evils. They therefore who are wronged, are not wronged if they bear nobly all that they suffer, yea, rather they gain even more abundantly, whether they be smitten of God, or scourged by the devil.

3. But what kind of sin had these children, it may be said, that they should do it away? For touching those who are of full age, and have been guilty of many negligences, one might with show of reason speak thus: but they who so underwent premature death, what sort of sins did they by their sufferings put away? Did you not hear me say, that though there were no sins, there is a recompense of rewards hereafter for them that suffer ill here? Wherein then were the young children hurt in being slain for such a cause, and borne away speedily into that waveless harbor? Because, do you say, they would in many instances have achieved, had they lived, many and great deeds of goodness. Why, for this cause He lays up for them beforehand no small reward, the ending their lives for such a cause. Besides, if the children were to have been any great persons, He would not have suffered them to be snatched away beforehand. For if they that eventually will live in continual wickedness are endured by Him with so great long-sufferings, much more would He not have suffered these to be so taken off had He foreknown they would accomplish any great things.

And these are the reasons we have to give; yet these are not all; but there are also others more mysterious than these, which He knows perfectly, who Himself orders these things. Let us then give up unto Him the more perfect understanding of this matter, and apply ourselves to what follows, and in the calamities of others let us learn to bear all things nobly. Yea, for it was no little scene of woe, which then befell Bethlehem, the children were snatched from their mother's breast, and dragged unto this unjust slaughter.

And if you are yet faint-hearted, and not equal to controlling yourself in these things, learn the end of him who dared all this, and recover yourself a little. For very quickly was he overtaken by punishment for these things; and he paid the due penalty of such an abominable act, ending his life by a grievous death, and more pitiable than that which he now dared inflict; suffering also countless additional ills, which you may know of by perusing Josephus' account of these events. But, lest we should make our discourse long, and interrupt its continuity, we have not thought it necessary to insert that account in what we are saying.

4. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, Jeremiah 31:15 saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not. Matthew 2:17-18

Thus having filled the hearer with horror by relating these things: the slaughter so violent and unjust, so extremely cruel and lawless; he comforts him again, by saying, Not from God's wanting power to prevent it did all this take place, nor from any ignorance of His, but when He both knew it, and foretold it, and that loudly by His prophet. Be not troubled then, neither despond, looking unto His unspeakable providence, which one may most clearly see, alike by what He works, and by what He permits. And this He intimated in another place also, when discoursing to His disciples. I mean where, having forewarned them of the judgment seats, and executions, and of the wars of the world, and of the battle that knows no truce, to uphold their spirit and to comfort them He says, Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father which is in Heaven. Matthew 10:29 These things He said, signifying that nothing is done without His knowledge, but while He knows all, yet not in all does He act. Be not then troubled, He says, neither be disturbed. For if He know what ye suffer, and has power to hinder it, it is quite clear that it is in His providence and care for you that He does not hinder it. And this we ought to bear in mind in our own temptations also, and great will be the consolation we shall thence receive.

But what, it may be said, has Rachel to do with Bethlehem? For it says, Rachel weeping for her children. And what has Rama to do with Rachel? Rachel was the mother of Benjamin, and on his death, they buried her in the horse-course that was near this place. The tomb then being near, and the portion pertaining unto Benjamin her infant (for Rama was of the tribe of Benjamin), from the head of the tribe first, and next from the place of her sepulture, He naturally denominates her young children who were massacred. Then to show that the wound that befell her was incurable and cruel, He says, she would not be comforted because they are not.

Hence again we are taught this, which I mentioned before, never to be confounded when what is happening is contrary to the promise of God. Behold, for instance, when He had come for the salvation of the people, or rather for the salvation of the world, of what kind were His beginnings. His mother, first, in flight; His birth-place is involved in irremediable calamities, and a murder is perpetrated of all murders the bitterest, and there is lamentation and great mourning, and wailings everywhere. But be not troubled; for He is wont ever to accomplish His own dispensations by their contraries, affording us from thence a very great demonstration of His power.

Thus did He lead on His own disciples also, and prepared them to do all their duty, bringing about things by their contraries, that the marvel might be greater. They, at any rate, being scourged and persecuted, and suffering terrors without end, did in this way get the better of them that were beating and persecuting them.

5. But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appears in a dream to Joseph saying, Arise, and take the young Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel. Matthew 2:19-20

He no more says fly, but go. Do you see again after the temptation refreshment? Then after the refreshment danger again? In that he was freed indeed from his banishment, and came back again to his own country; and beheld the murderer of the children brought to the slaughter; but when he has set foot on his own country, he finds again a remnant of the former perils, the son of the tyrant living, and being king.

But how did Archelaus reign over Judæa, when Pontius Pilate was governor? Herod's death had recently taken place, and the kingdom had not yet been divided into many parts; but as he had only just ended his life, the son for a while kept possession of the kingdom in the room of his father Herod; his brother also bearing this name, which is the reason why the evangelist added, in the room of his father Herod.

It may be said, however, if he was afraid to settle in Judæa on account of Archelaus, he had cause to fear Galilee also on account of Herod. I answer, By his changing the place, the whole matter was thenceforward thrown into shade; for the whole assault was upon Bethlehem and the coasts thereof. Therefore now that the slaughter had taken place, the youth Archelaus had no other thought, but that the whole had come to an end, and that among the many, He that was sought had been destroyed. And besides, his father having come to such an end of his life before his eyes, he became for the future more cautious about farther proceedings, and about urging on that course of iniquity.

Joseph therefore comes to Nazareth, partly to avoid the danger, partly also delighting to abide in his native place. To give him the more courage, he receives also an oracle from the angel touching this matter. Luke, however, does not say that he came there by Divine warning, but that when they had fulfilled all the purification, they returned to Nazareth. Luke 2:39 What then may one say? That Luke is giving an account of the time before the going down to Egypt, when he says these things. For He would not have brought them down there before the purification, in order that nothing should be done contrary to the law, but he waited for her to be purified, and to go to Nazareth, and that then they should go down to Egypt. Then, after their return, He bids them go to Nazareth. But before this they were not warned of God to go there, but yearning after their native place, they did so of their own accord. For since they had gone up for no other cause but on account of the taxing, and had not so much as a place where to stay, when they had fulfilled that for which they had come up, they went down to Nazareth.

6. We see here the cause why the angel also, putting them at ease for the future, restores them to their home. And not even this simply, but he adds to it a prophecy, That it might be fulfilled, says he, which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene. Matthew 2:23

And what manner of prophet said this? Be not curious, nor overbusy. For many of the prophetic writings have been lost; and this one may see from the history of the Chronicles. For being negligent, and continually falling into ungodliness, some they suffered to perish, others they themselves burnt up and cut to pieces. The latter fact Jeremiah relates; Jeremiah 36:23 the former, he who composed the fourth book of Kings, saying, that after a long time the book of Deuteronomy was hardly found, buried somewhere and lost. But if, when there was no barbarian there, they so betrayed their books, much more when the barbarians had overrun them. For as to the fact, that the prophet had foretold it, the apostles themselves in many places call Him a Nazarene.

Was not this then, one may say, casting a shade over the prophecy touching Bethlehem? By no means: rather this very fact was sure greatly to stir up men, and to awaken them to the search of what was said of Him. Thus, for example, Nathanael too enters on the inquiry concerning Him, saying, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? John 1:46 For the place was of little esteem; or rather not that place only, but also the whole district of Galilee. Therefore the Pharisees said, Search and look, for out of Galilee arises no prophet. Nevertheless, He is not ashamed to be named even from thence, signifying that He needs not ought of the things of men; and His disciples also He chooses out of Galilee; everywhere cutting off the pretexts of them who are disposed to be remiss, and giving tokens that we have no need of outward things, if we practise virtue. For this cause He does not choose for Himself so much as a house; for the

Son of Man, says He, has not where to lay His head; Matthew 8:20 and when Herod is plotting against Him, He flees, and at His birth is laid in a manger, and abides in an inn, and takes a mother of low estate; teaching us to think no such thing a disgrace, and from the first outset trampling under foot the haughtiness of man, and bidding us give ourselves up to virtue only.

7. For why do you pride yourself on your country, when I am commanding you to be a stranger to the whole world? (so He speaks); when you have leave to become such as that all the universe shall not be worthy of you? For these things are so utterly contemptible, that they are not thought worthy of any consideration even among the philosophers of the Greeks, but are called Externals, and occupy the lowest place.

But yet Paul, one may say, allows them, saying on this wise, 'As touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sake.' But tell me, when, and of what things was he discoursing, and to whom? Why, to those of Gentile origin, who were puffing themselves up on their faith, and exalting themselves against the Jews, and so breaking them off the more: to quell the swelling pride of the one, and to win over the others, and thoroughly excite them to the same emulation. For when he is speaking of those noble and great men, hear how he says, They that say these things, show plainly that they seek a country; and truly if they had been mindful of that from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned: but now they desire another, a better country. Hebrews 11:14-15 And again, These all died in faith, not having obtained the promises, but having seen them afar off, and embraced them. And John too said to those that were coming to him, Think not to say, We have Abraham to our father. Matthew 3:9 And Paul again, For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel; neither they, which are the children of the flesh, are they the children of God. Romans 9:6-8 For what were the sons of Samuel advantaged, tell me, by their father's nobleness, when they were not heirs of their father's virtue? And what profit had Moses' sons, not having emulated his perfection? Therefore neither did they inherit the dominion; but while they enrolled him as their father, the rule of the people passed away to another, to him who had become his son in the way of virtue. And what harm was it to Timothy, that he was of a Greek father? Or what on the other hand again was Noah's son profited by the virtue of his father, when he became a slave instead of free? Do you see, how little the nobleness of a father avails his children in the way of advocacy? For the wickedness of Ham's disposition overcame the laws of nature, and cast him not only out of the nobility which he had in respect of his father, but also out of his free estate. And what of Esau? Was he not son of Isaac, and had he not his father to stand his friend? Yea, his father too endeavored and desired that he should partake of the blessings, and he himself for the sake of this did all that was commanded him. Nevertheless, because he was untoward, none of these things profited him; but although he was by birth first, and had his father on his side doing everything for this object, yet not having God with him, he lost all.

But why do I speak of men? The Jews were sons of God, and gained nothing by this their high birth. Now if a man, having become a son of God, but failing to show forth an excellency meet for this noble birth, is even punished the more abundantly; why do you bring me forward the nobleness of ancestors remote or near? For not under the old covenant only, but even under the new, one may find this rule to have held. For as many as received Him, it is said to them gave He power to become the sons of God. John 1:12 And yet many of these children Paul has affirmed to be nothing profited by their father; For if you be circumcised, says he, Christ shall profit you nothing. Galatians 5:2 And if Christ be no help to those who will not take heed to themselves, how shall a man stand up in their behalf?

8. Let us not therefore pride ourselves either on high birth, or on wealth, but rather despise them who are so minded: neither let us be dejected at poverty. But let us seek that wealth, which consists in good works;

let us flee that poverty, which causes men to be in wickedness, by reason of which also that rich man was poor; Luke 16:24 wherefore he had not at his command so much as a drop of water, and that, although he made much entreaty. Whereas, who can be so poor among us, as to want water enough even for comfort? There is none such. For even they that are pining with extreme hunger, may have the comfort of a drop of water; and not of a drop only, but of refreshment too far more abundant. Not so that rich man, but he was poor even to this degree: and what was yet more grievous, he could not so much as soothe his poverty from any source. Why then do we gape after riches, since they bring us not into Heaven?

For tell me, if any king among those upon earth had said, It is impossible for him that is rich to be distinguished at court, or to enjoy any honor; would ye not have thrown away every one his riches with contempt? So then, if they cast us out from such honor as is in the palaces below, they shall be worthy of all contempt: but, when the King of Heaven is day by day crying aloud and saying, It is hard with them, to set foot on that sacred threshold; shall we not give up all, and withdraw from our possessions, that with boldness we may enter into the kingdom? And of what consideration are we worthy, who are at great pains to encompass ourselves with the things that obstruct our way there; and to hide them not only in chests, but even in the earth, when we might entrust them to the guard of the very Heavens? Since now surely you are doing the same, as if any husbandman, having gotten wheat wherewith to sow a rich land, was to leave the land alone, and bury all the wheat in a pit, so as neither to enjoy it himself, nor for the wheat to come to ought, but decay and waste. But what is their common plea, when we accuse them of these things? It gives no little comfort, say they, to know that all is laid up for us in safety at home. Nay, rather not to know of its being laid up is a comfort. For even if you are not afraid of famine, yet other more grievous things, on account of this store, must needs be a terror to you: deaths, wars, plots laid against you. And if a famine should ever befall us, the people again, constrained by the belly, takes weapon in hand against your house. Or rather, in so doing, you are first of all bringing famine into our cities, and next you are forming for your own house this gulf, more grievous than famine. For by stress of famine I know not any who have come to a speedy end; there being in fact many means in many quarters which may be devised to assuage that evil: but for possessions and riches, and the pursuits connected with them, I can show many to have come by their ruin, some in secret, some openly. And with many such instances the highways abound, with many the courts of law, and the market-places. But why speak I of the highways, the courts of law and the market-places? Why, the very sea you may behold filled with their blood. For not over the land only, as it seems, has this tyranny prevailed, but over the ocean also has walked in festal procession with great excess. And one makes a voyage for gold, another, again, is stabbed for the same; and the same tyrannical power has made one a merchant, the other a murderer.

What then can be less trustworthy than Mammon, seeing that for his sake one travels, and ventures, and is slain? But who, it is said, will pity a charmer that is bitten with a serpent? Sirach 12:13 For we ought, knowing its cruel tyranny, to flee that slavery, and destroy that grievous longing. But how, says one, is this possible? By introducing another longing, the longing for Heaven. Since he that desires the kingdom will laugh covetousness to scorn; he that has become Christ's slave is no slave of mammon, but rather his lord; for him that flies from him, he is wont to follow, and to fly from him that pursues. He honors not so much his pursuer as his despiser; no one does he so laugh to scorn, as them that desire him; nor does he only laugh them to scorn, but wraps round them also innumerable bonds.

Be it ours then, however late, to loose these grievous chains. Why bring your reasonable soul into bondage to brute matter, to the mother of those untold evils? But, oh the absurdity! That while we are warring against it in words, it makes war with us by deeds, and leads and carries us everywhere about,

insulting us as purchased with money, and meet for the lash; and what can be more disgraceful and dishonorable than this?

Again: if we do not get the better of senseless forms of matter, how shall we have the advantage of the incorporeal powers? If we despise not vile earth and abject stones, how shall we bring into subjection the principalities and authorities? How shall we practise temperance? I mean, if silver dazzle and overpower us, when shall we be able to hurry by a fair face? For, in fact, some are so sold under this tyranny, as be moved somehow even at the mere show of the gold, and in playfulness to say, that the very eyes are the better for a gold coin coming in sight. But make not such jests, whoever you are; for nothing so injures the eyes, both those of the body and those of the soul, as the lust of these things. For instance; it was this grievous longing that put out the lamps of those virgins, and cast them out of the bride chamber. This sight, which (as you said) does good to the eyes, suffered not the wretched Judas to hearken unto the Lord's voice, but led him even to the halter, made him burst asunder in the midst; and, after all that, conducted him on to hell.

What then can be more lawless than this? What more horrible? I do not mean the substance of riches, but the unseasonable and frantic desire of them? Why, it even drops human gore, and looks murder, and is fiercer than any wild beast, tearing in pieces them that fall in its way, and what is much worse, it suffers them not even to have any sense of being so mangled. For reason would that those who are so treated should stretch forth their hand to them that pass by, and call them to their assistance, but these are even thankful for such rendings of their flesh, than which what can be more wretched?

Let us then, bearing in mind all these things, flee the incurable disease; let us heal the wounds it has made, and withdraw ourselves from such a pest: in order that both here we may live a secure and untroubled life, and attain to the future treasure; unto which God grant that we may all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom unto the Father together with the Holy Ghost be glory, might, honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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