

Two Exhortations to Theodore After His Fall - Part 3

by St. John Chrysostom

Do not despair, but rather take courage and stand up against the enemy, and remember that human nature is quick to fall, but also quick to recover.

Scripture: Isaiah 5:8, Matthew 11:28, John 14:2, Romans 2:6, 1 Corinthians 15:41, 2 Corinthians 5:10, 1 Thessalonians 4:1, Hebrews 4:13

Topics: "Repentance", "Judgment"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of repentance and the dangers of despair, emphasizing the need to confess sins with true remorse and seek forgiveness through a genuine change of heart. He warns against the traps of indolence and despair, urging believers to cut off these roots and manifest zeal in turning towards God. Chrysostom highlights the significance of good deeds in balancing out sins and the ultimate judgment according to one's works, as declared in the divine oracles.

Transcript

19. Do not then merely set forth your sins being your own accuser, but as one who ought to be justified by the method of repentance; for thus you will be able to put your soul, which makes its confession, to shame, so that it falls no more into the same sins. For to accuse ourselves vehemently and call ourselves sinners is common, so to say, to unbelievers also. Many at least of those who belong to the stage, both men and women, who habitually practise the greatest shamelessness, call themselves miserable, but not with the proper aim.

Wherefore I would not even call this confession; for the publication of their sins is not accompanied with compunction of soul, nor with bitter tears, nor with conversion of life, but in fact some of them make it in quest of a reputation for the hearers for candor of speech. For offenses do not seem so grievous when some other person announces them as when the perpetrator himself reports them. And they who under the influence of strong despair have lapsed into a state of insensibility, and treat the opinion of their fellowmen with contempt proclaim their own evil deeds with much effrontery, as if they were the doings of others.

But I do not wish you to be any of these, nor to be brought out of despair to confession, but with a good expectation, after cutting away the whole root of despair, to manifest zeal in the contrary direction. And

what is the root and mother of this despair? It is indolence; or rather one would not call it the root only, but also the nurse and mother. For as in the case of wool decay breeds moths, and is in turn increased by them; so here also indolence breeds despair, and is itself nourished in turn by despair; and thus supplying each other with this accursed exchange, they acquire no small additional power.

If any one then cuts one of these off, and hews it in pieces, he will easily be able to get the better of the remaining one. For on the one hand he who is not indolent will never fall into despair, and on the other he who is supported by good hopes, and does not despair of himself, will not be able to fall into indolence. Pray then, wrench this pair asunder, and break the yoke in pieces, by which I mean a variable and yet depressing habit of thought; for that which holds these two things together is not uniform, but manifold in shame and character.

And what is this? It happens that one who has repented has done many great and good deeds, but meanwhile he has committed some sin equivalent to those good deeds, and this especially is sufficient to plunge him into despair, as if the buildings which had been set up were all pulled down, and all the labor which he had bestowed upon them had been vain and come to naught. But this must be taken into account, and such reasoning must be repelled, because, if we do not store up in good time a measure of good deeds equivalent to the sins which are committed after them, nothing can hinder us from sinking grievously and completely.

But as it is, (right action) like some stout breastplate does not suffer the sharp and bitter dart to accomplish its work, but even if it is itself cut through, it averts much danger from the body. For he who departs to the other world with many deeds both good and bad, will have some alleviation in respect of the punishment and the torment there; but if a man is destitute of these good works, and takes only the evil with him, it is impossible to say what great sufferings he will undergo, when he is conducted to everlasting punishment.

For a balance will be struck there between the evil deeds and those which are not such; and should the latter weigh down the scale they will to no small extent have saved the doer of them, and the injury arising from the doing of evil deeds is not so strong as to drag the man down from the foremost place; but if the evil deeds exceed, they carry him off into hell fire, because the number of his good actions is not so great as to be able to make a stand against this violent impulse.

And these things are not merely suggested by our own reasoning, but declared also by the divine oracles; for He Himself says, He shall reward every man according to his works. Romans 2:6 And not only in hell, but also in the kingdom one will find many differences; for He says in my Fathers house are many mansions; John 14:2 and, there is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon. 1 Corinthians 15:41 And what wonder, if in dealing with such great matters he has spoken with such precision, seeing that He declares there is a difference in that world even between one star and another?

Knowing then all these things let us never desist from doing good deeds, nor grow weary, nor, if we should be unable to reach the rank of the sun or of the moon, let us despise that of the stars. For if only we display thus much virtue at least, we shall be able to have a place in Heaven. And though we may not have become gold, or precious stone, yet if we only occupy the rank of silver we shall abide in the foundation; only let us not fall back again into that material which the fire readily devours, nor, when we are unable to accomplish great things, desist also from small ones, for this is the part of extreme folly, which I trust we may not experience.

For just as material wealth increases if the lovers of it do not despise even the smallest gains, so is it also with the spiritual. For it is a strange thing that the judge should not overlook the reward of even a cup of cold water, but that we, if our achievements are not altogether great, should neglect the performance of little things. For he who does not despise the lesser things, will exercise much zeal concerning the greatest; but he who overlooks the former will also abstain from the latter; and to prevent this taking place Christ has defined great rewards even for these small things.

For what is easier than to visit the sick? Yet even this He requites with a great recompense. Lay hold then on eternal life, delight in the Lord, and supplicate Him; take up again the easy yoke, bow yourself beneath the light burden, put a finish to your life worthy of the beginning; do not suffer so great a stream of wealth to slip past you. For if you should continue provoking God by your deeds, you will destroy yourself; but if before much damage has been done, and all your husbandry has been overwhelmed with a flood, you will dam up the channels of wickedness, you will be able to recover again what has been spoiled and to add to it not a little further produce.

Having considered all these things, shake off the dust, get up from the ground, and you will be formidable to the adversary; for he himself indeed has overthrown you, as if you would never rise again; but if he sees you again lifting up your hands against him, he will receive such an unexpected blow that he will be less forward in trying to upset you again, and you yourself will be more secure against receiving any wound of that kind in future. For if the calamities of others are sufficient to instruct us, much more those which we have ourselves undergone.

And this is what I expect speedily to see in the case of your own dear self, and that by the grace of God you are again become more radiant than before, and displaying such great virtue, as even to be a protector of others in the world above. Only do not despair, do not fall back; for I will not cease repeating this in every form of speech, and wherever I see you, as well as by the lips of others; and if you listen to this you will no longer need other remedies.

Letter 2

1. If it were possible to express tears and groans by means of writing I would have filled the letter, which I now send to you, with them. Now I weep not because you are anxious concerning your patrimony, but because you have blotted out your name from the list of the brethren, because you have trampled upon the covenant which you had made with Christ. This is the reason why I shudder, this is the cause of my distress. On this account do I fear and tremble, knowing that the rejection of this covenant will bring great condemnation upon those who have enlisted for this noble warfare, and owing to indolence have deserted their proper rank.

And that the punishment for such is heavier than for others is manifest for this reason. For no one would indite a private individual for shunning military service; but when once a man has become a soldier, if he be caught deserting the ranks, he runs a risk of suffering the most extreme penalty. There is nothing strange, beloved Theodore, in a wrestler falling, but in his remaining in a fallen condition; neither is it a grievous thing for the warrior to be wounded, but to despair after the blow has been struck, and to neglect the wound.

No merchant, having once suffered shipwreck, and lost his freight, desists from sailing, but again crosses the sea and the billows, and the broad ocean, and recovers his former wealth. We see athletes also who after many falls have gained the wreath of victory; and often, before now, a soldier who has once ran away

has turned out a champion, and prevailed over the enemy. Many also of those who have denied Christ owing to the pressure of torture, have fought again, and departed at last with the crown of martyrdom upon their brows.

But if each of these had despaired after the first blow, he would not have reaped the subsequent benefits. Even so now, beloved Theodore, because the enemy has shaken you a little from your position, do not thou give yourself an additional thrust into the pit, but stand up bravely, and return speedily to the place from which you have departed, and deem not this blow, lasting but for a little while, any reproach. For if you saw a soldier returning wounded from war you would not reproach him; for it is a reproach to cast away one's arms, and to hold aloof from the enemy; but as long as a man stands fighting, even if he be wounded and retreat for a short time, no one is so unfeeling or inexperienced in matters of war, as to find any fault with him.

Exemption from wounds is the lot of non-combatants; but those who advance with much spirit against the enemy may sometimes be wounded and fail; which is exactly what has now occurred in your case; for suddenly, while you attempted to destroy the serpent you were bitten. But take courage, you need a little vigilance, and then not a trace of this wound will be left; or rather by the grace of God you will crush the head of the Evil One himself; nor let it trouble you that you are soon impeded, even at the outset.

For the eye, the keen eye of the Evil One perceived the excellence of your soul, and guessed from many tokens that a brave adversary would wax strong against him; for he expected that one who had promptly attacked him with such great vehemence would easily overcome him, if he persevered. Therefore he was diligent, and watchful, and mightily stirred up against you, or rather against his own head, if you will bravely stand your ground. For who did not marvel at your quick, sincere, and fervent change to good?

For delicacy of food was disregarded, and costliness of raiment was despised, all manner of parade was put down, and all the zeal for the wisdom of this world was suddenly transferred to the divine oracles; whole days were spent in reading, and whole nights in prayer; no mention was made of your family dignity, nor any thought taken of your wealth; but to clasp the knees and hasten to the feet of the brethren you recognized as something nobler than high birth. These things irritated the Evil One, these things stirred him up to more vehement strife; but yet he did not give a deadly blow.

For if after a long time, and continual fastings, and sleeping on the bare ground and the rest of the discipline he overthrew you, even then there was no need to despair; nevertheless one would have said that the damage was great if defeat had taken place after many toils, and labour, and victories; but inasmuch as he upset you as soon as you had stripped for the contest with him, all that he accomplished was to render you more eager to do battle with him. For that fell pirate attacked you just as you were sailing out of the harbor, not when you had returned from your trading voyage, bringing a full cargo.

And as when one has attempted to stay a fierce lion, and has only grazed his skin, he has done him no injury but only stirred him up the more against himself, and rendered him more confident and difficult to capture afterwards: even so the common enemy of all has attempted to strike a deep blow, but has missed it, and consequently made his antagonist more vigilant and wary for the future.

2. For human nature is a slippery thing, quick to be cheated, but quick also to recover from deceit and as it speedily falls, so also does it readily rise. For even that blessed man, I mean David the chosen king and prophet, after he had accomplished many good deeds, betrayed himself to be a man, for once he fell in love with a strange woman, nor did he stop there but he committed adultery on account of his passion,

and he committed murder on account of his adultery; but he did not try to inflict a third blow upon himself because he had already received two such heavy ones, but immediately hastened to the physician, and applied the remedies, fasting, tears, lamentation, constant prayer, frequent confession of the sin; and so by these means he propitiated God, insomuch that he was restored to his former position, insomuch that after adultery and murder the memory of the father was able to shield the idolatry of the son. For the son of this David, Solomon by name, was caught by the same snare as his father, and out of complaisance to women fell away from the God of his fathers. 1 Kings 11:3-4 You see how great an evil it is not to master pleasure, not to upset the ruling principle in nature, and for a man to be the slave of women. This same Solomon then, who was formerly righteous and wise but who ran a risk of being deprived of all the kingdom on account of his sin, God permitted to keep the sixth part of the government on account of the renown of his father. 1 Kings 11:12-13

Now if your zeal had been concerned with worldly eloquence, and then you had given it up in despair, I should have reminded you of the law courts and the judgment seat and the victories achieved there and the former boldness of your speech, and should have exhorted you to return to your labours in that behalf: but inasmuch as our race is for heavenly things, and we take no account of the things which are on earth, I put you in remembrance of another court of justice, and of that fearful and tremendous seat of judgment; for we must all be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:10 And He will then sit as judge who is now disregarded by you. What shall we say then, let me ask at that time? Or what defense shall we make, if we continue to disregard Him? What shall we say then? Shall we plead the anxieties of business? Nay He has anticipated this by saying, What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Matthew 16:26 Or that we have been deceived by others? But it did not help Adam in his defense to screen himself behind his wife, and say the woman whom you gave me, she deceived me; Genesis 3:12 even as the serpent was no excuse for the woman. Terrible, O beloved Theodore, is that tribunal, one which needs no accusers and waits for no witnesses; for all things are naked and laid open to Him Hebrews 4:13 who judges us, and we must submit to give an account not of deeds only but also of thoughts; for that judge is quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart. Hebrews 4:12 But perhaps you will allege weakness of nature as the excuse, and inability to bear the yoke. And what kind of defense is this, that you have not strength to bear the easy yoke, that you are unable to carry the light burden? Is recovery from fatigue a grievous and oppressive thing? For it is to this that Christ calls us, saying, Come unto me all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest; take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Matthew 11:28 For what can be lighter I ask, than to be released from anxieties, and business, and fears, and labors, and to stand outside the rough billows of life, and dwell in a tranquil haven?

3. Which of all things in the world seems to you most desirable and enviable? No doubt you will say government, and wealth, and public reputation. And yet what is more wretched than these things when they are compared with the liberty of Christians. For the ruler is subjected to the wrath of the populace and to the irrational impulses of the multitude, and to the fear of higher rulers, and to anxieties on behalf of those who are ruled, and the ruler of yesterday becomes a private citizen today; for this present life in no wise differs from a stage, but just as there, one man fills the position of a king, a second of a general, and a third of a soldier, but when evening has come on the king is no king, the ruler no ruler, and the general no general, even so also in that day each man will receive his due reward not according to the outward part which he has played but according to his works. Well! Is glory a precious thing which perishes like the power of grass? Or wealth, the possessors of which are pronounced unhappy? For woe we read, to the

rich; Luke 6:24 and again, Woe unto them who trust in their strength and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches! But the Christian never becomes a private person after being a ruler, or a poor man after being rich, or without honour after being held in honour; but he abides rich even when he is poor, and is exalted when he strives to humble himself; and from the rule which he exercises no human being can depose him, but only one of those rulers who are under the power of this world's potentate of darkness.

Marriage is right, you say; I also assent to this. For marriage, we read, is honourable and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge; Hebrews 13:4 but it is no longer possible for you to observe the right conditions of marriage. For if he who has been attached to a heavenly bridegroom deserts him, and joins himself to a wife the act is adultery, even if you call it marriage ten thousand times over; or rather it is worse than adultery in proportion as God is greater than man. Let no one deceive you saying: God has not forbidden to marry; I know this as well as you; He has not forbidden to marry, but He has forbidden to commit adultery, may you be preserved from ever engaging yourself in marriage! And why do you marvel if marriage is judged as if it were adultery, when God is disregarded? Slaughter has brought about righteousness, and mercy has been a cause of condemnation more than slaughter; because the latter has been according to the mind of God but the former has been forbidden. It was reckoned to Phinees for righteousness that he pierced to death the woman who committed fornication, together with the fornicator; Numbers 25:7-11 but Samuel, that saint of God although he wept and mourned and entreated for whole nights, could not rescue Saul from the condemnation which God issued against him, because he saved, contrary to the design of God, the king of the alien tribes whom he ought to have slain. 1 Samuel xv If then mercy has been a cause of condemnation more than slaughter because God was disobeyed, what wonder is it if marriage condemns more than adultery when it involves the rejection of Christ? For, as I said at the beginning, if you were a private person no one would indict you for shunning to serve as a soldier; but now you are no longer your own master, being engaged in the service of so great a king. For if the wife has not power over her own body, but the husband, 1 Corinthians 7:4 much more they who live in Christ must be unable to have authority over their body. He who is now despised, the same will then be our judge; think ever on Him and the river of fire: For a river of fire we read, winds before His face; Daniel 7:10 for it is impossible for one who has been delivered over by Him to the fire to expect any end of his punishment. But the unseemly pleasures of this life no-wise differ from shadows and dreams; for before the deed of sin is completed, the conditions of pleasure are extinguished; and the punishments for these have no limit. And the sweetness lasts for a little while but the pain is everlasting.

Tell me, what is there stable in this world? Wealth which often does not last even to the evening? Or glory? Hear what a certain righteous man says: My life is swifter than a runner. Job 9:25 For as they dash away before they stand still, even so does this glory take to flight before it has fairly reached us. Nothing is more precious than the soul; and even they who have gone to the extremity of folly have not been ignorant of this; for there is no equivalent of the soul is the saying of a heathen poet. I know that you have become much weaker for the struggle with the Evil One; I know that you are standing in the very midst of the flame of pleasures; but if you will say to the enemy We do not serve your pleasures, and we do not bow down to the root of all your evils; if you will bend your eye upward, the Saviour will even now shake out the fire, and will burn up those who have flung you into it, and will send to you in the midst of the furnace a cloud, and dew, and a rustling breeze, so that the fire may not lay hold of your thought or your conscience. Only do not consume yourself with fire. For the arms and engines of besiegers have often been unable to destroy the fortification of cities, but the treachery of one or two of the citizens dwelling inside has betrayed them

to the enemy without any trouble on his part. And now if none of your thoughts within betray you, should the Evil One bring countless engines against you from without he will bring them in vain.

4. You have by the grace of God many and great men who sympathize with your trouble, who encourage you to the fight, who tremble for your soul -- Valerius the holy man of God, Florentius who is in every respect his brother, Porphyrius who is wise with the wisdom of Christ, and many others. These are daily mourning, and praying for you without ceasing; and they would have obtained what they asked for, long ago, if only you had been willing to withdraw yourself a little space out of the hands of the enemy.

Now then is it not strange that, while others do not even now despair of your salvation, but are continually praying that they may have their member restored to them, you yourself, having once fallen, art unwilling to get up again, and remainest prostrate, all but crying aloud to the enemy: Slay me, smite me, spare not? Does he who falls not rise up again? Jeremiah 8:4 speaks the divine oracle. But you are striving against this and contradicting it; for if one who has fallen despairs it is as much as to say that he who falls does not rise up again.

I entreat you do not so great a wrong to yourself; do not pour upon us such a flood of sorrow. I do not say at the present time, when you have not yet completed your twentieth year, but even if, after achieving many things, and spending your whole life in Christ you had, in extreme old age, experienced this attack, even then it would not have been right to despair, but to call to mind the robber who was justified on the cross, the labourers who wrought about the eleventh hour, and received the wages of the whole day.

But as it is not well that those who have fallen near the very extremity of life should abandon hope, if they be sober minded, so on the other hand it is not safe to feed upon this hope, and say, Here for a while, I will enjoy the sweets of life, but afterwards, when I have worked for a short time, I shall receive the wages of the whole working time. For I recollect hearing you often say, when many were exhorting you to frequent the schools; But what if I bring my life to a bad end in a short space of time, how shall I depart to Him who has said 'Delay not to turn to the Lord, nor put off day after day?'

Sirach 5:8 Recover this thought, and stand in fear of the thief; for by this name Christ calls our departure hence, because it comes upon us unawares. Consider the anxieties of life which befall us, both those which are personal to ourselves, and which are common to us with others, the fear of rulers, the envy of citizens, the danger which often hangs over us imperilling even life itself, the labours, the distresses, the servile flatteries, such as are unbecoming even to slaves if they be earnest minded men, the fruit of our labours coming to an end in this world, a fact which is the most distressing of all.

It has been the lot indeed of many to miss the enjoyment of the things for which they have laboured, and after having consumed the prime of their manhood in labours and perils, just when they hoped that they should receive their reward they have departed taking nothing with them. For if, after undergoing many dangers, and completing many campaigns, one will scarcely look upon an earthly king with confidence, how will any one be able to behold the heavenly king, if he has lived and fought for another all his time.

5. Would you have me speak of the domestic cares of wife, and children and slaves? It is an evil thing to wed a very poor wife, or a very rich one; for the former is injurious to the husband's means, the latter to his authority and independence. It is a grievous thing to have children, still more grievous not to have any; for in the latter case marriage has been to no purpose, in the former a bitter bondage has to be undergone. If a child is sick, it is the occasion of no small fear; if he dies an untimely death, there is inconsolable grief; and at every stage of growth there are various anxieties on their account, and many fears and toils.

And what is one to say to the rascalities of domestic slaves? Is this then life, Theodore, when one's soul is distracted in so many directions, when a man has to serve so many, to live for so many, and never for himself? Now among us, O friend, none of these things happen, I appeal to yourself as a witness. For during that short time when you were willing to lift your head above the waves of this world, you know what great cheerfulness and gladness you enjoyed. For there is no man free, save only he who lives for Christ.

He stands superior to all troubles, and if he does not choose to injure himself no one else will be able to do this, but he is impregnable; he is not stung by the loss of wealth; for he has learned that we brought nothing into this world, neither can we carry anything out; 1 Timothy 6:7 he is not caught by the longings of ambition or glory; for he has learned that our citizenship is in heaven; Philippians 3:20 no one annoys him by abuse, or provokes him by blows; there is only one calamity for a Christian which is, disobedience to God; but all the other things, such as loss of property, exile, peril of life, he does not even reckon to be a grievance at all.

And that which all dread, departure hence to the other world -- this is to him sweeter than life itself. For as when one has climbed to the top of a cliff and gazes on the sea and those who are sailing upon it, he sees some being washed by the waves, others running upon hidden rocks, some hurrying in one direction, others being driven in another, like prisoners, by the force of the gale, many actually in the water, some of them using their hands only in the place of a boat and a rudder, and many drifting along upon a single plank, or some fragment of the vessel, others floating dead, a scene of manifold and various disaster; even so he who is engaged in the service of Christ drawing himself out of the turmoil and stormy billows of life takes his seat upon secure and lofty ground.

For what position can be loftier or more secure than that in which a man has only one anxiety, How he ought to please God? 1 Thessalonians 4:1 Have you seen the shipwrecks, Theodore, of those who sail upon this sea? Wherefore, I beseech you, avoid the deep water, avoid the stormy billows, and seize some lofty spot where it is not possible to be captured. There is a resurrection, there is a judgment, there is a terrible tribunal which awaits us when we have gone out of this world; we must all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ.

Romans 14:10 It is not in vain that we are threatened with hell fire, it is not without purpose that such great blessings have been prepared for us. The things of this life are a shadow, and more naught even than a shadow, being full of many fears, and many dangers, and extreme bondage. Do not then deprive yourself both of that world, and of this, when you may gain both, if you please. Now that they who live in Christ will gain the things of this world Paul teaches us when he says: But I spare you; 1 Corinthians 7:28 and again But this I say for your profit. 1 Corinthians 7:35 Do you see that even here he who cares for the things of the Lord is superior to the man who has married? It is not possible for one who has departed to the other world to repent; no athlete, when he has quitted the lists, and the spectators have dispersed, can contend again.

Be always thinking of these things, and break in pieces the sharp sword of the Evil One, by means of which he destroys many. And this is despair, which cuts off from hope those who have been overthrown. This is the strong weapon of the enemy, and the only way in which he holds down those who have been made captives is by binding them with this chain, which, if we choose, we shall speedily be able to break by the grace of God. I know that I have exceeded the due measure of a letter, but forgive me; for I am not willingly in this condition, but have been constrained by my love and sorrow, owing to which I forced myself to write this letter also, although many would have prevented me. Cease labouring in vain and

sowing upon rock many have been saying to me. But I hearkened to none of them. For there is hope I said to myself that, God willing, my letter will accomplish something; but if that which we deprecate should take place, we shall at least have the advantage of escaping self reproach for keeping silence, and we shall not be worse than sailors on the sea, who, when they behold men of their own craft drifting on a plank, because their ship has been broken to pieces by the winds and waves, take down their sails, and cast anchor, and get into a boat and try to rescue the men, although strangers, known to them only in consequence of their calamity. But if the others were unwilling to be rescued no one would accuse those of their destruction who attempted to save them. This is what we offer; but we trust that by the grace of God you also will do your part, and we shall again see you occupying an eminent place in the flock of Christ. In answer to the prayers of the saints may we speedily receive you back, dear friend, sound in the true health. If you have any regard for us, and hast not utterly cast us out of your memory, please vouchsafe a reply to our letter; for in so doing you will give us much pleasure.

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