

A Sermon of St John Chrysostom on the Epistle for Sexagesima Sunday

2 Corinthians chapter 11, verse 21. Yet whereinsoever any is bold, (I speak in foolishness,) I am bold also.

See him again drawing back and using depreciation and correctives beforehand, although he has already even said many such things: “Would that ye could bear with me in a little foolishness;” (Ver. 1.) and again, “Let no man think me foolish: if ye do, yet as foolish receive me.” (Ver. 16.) “That which I speak, I speak not after the Lord, but as in foolishness.” (Ver. 17.) “Seeing that many glory after the flesh, I will glory also;” (Ver. 18.) and here again, “Whereinsoever any is bold, (I speak in foolishness) I am bold also.” Boldness and folly he calls it to speak aught great of himself, and that though there was a necessity, teaching us even to an excess to avoid any thing of the sort. For if after we have done all, we ought to call ourselves unprofitable; of what forgiveness can he be worthy who, when no reason presses, exalts himself and boasts? Therefore also did the Pharisee meet the fate he did, and even in harbor suffered shipwreck because he struck upon this rock. Therefore also doth Paul, although he sees very ample necessity for it, draw back nevertheless, and keep on observing that such speaking is a mark of foolishness. And then at length he makes the venture, putting forward the plea of necessity, and says,

Ver. 22. “Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I.”

For it was not all Hebrews that were Israelites, since both the Ammonites and Moabites were Hebrews. Wherefore he added somewhat to clear his nobility of descent, and says,

Ver. 22, 23. “Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I. Are they ministers of Christ. (I speak as one beside himself,) I more.”

He is not content with his former deprecation, but uses it again here also. “I speak as one beside himself, I more.” I am their superior and their better. And indeed he possessed clear proofs of his superiority, but nevertheless even so he terms the thing a folly. And yet if they were false Apostles, he heeded not to have introduced his own superiority by way of comparison, but to have destroyed their claim to “be ministers” at all. Well, he did destroy it, saying, “False Apostles, deceitful workers, fashioning themselves into Apostles of Christ,” (Ver. 13.) but now he doth not proceed in that way, for his discourse was about to proceed to strict examination; and no one when an examination is in hand simply asserts; but having first stated the case in the way of comparison, he shows it to be negated by the facts, a very strong negative. But besides, it is their opinion he gives, not his own assertion, when he says, “Are they ministers of Christ?” And having said, “I more,” he proceeds in his comparison, and shows that not by bare assertions, but by furnishing the proof that facts supply, he maintains the impress of the Apostleship. And leaving all his miracles, he begins with his trials; thus saying,

“In labors more abundantly, in stripes above measure.” This latter is greater than the former; to be both beaten and scourged.

“In prisons more abundantly.” Here too again is there an increase. “In deaths oft.” (1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 31) For, “I die,” saith he, “daily.” But here, even in reality; ‘for I have oft been delivered into mortal dangers.’

Ver. 24. “Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.”

Why, “save one?” There was an ancient law that he who had received more than the forty should be held disgraced amongst them. Lest then the vehemence and impetuosity of the executioner by inflicting more than the number should cause a man to be disgraced, they decreed that they should be inflicted, “save one,” that even if the executioner should exceed, he might not overpass the forty, but remaining within the prescribed number might not bring degradation on him that was scourged.

Ver. 25. “Thrice was I beaten with rods once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck.”

And what has this to do with the Gospel? Because he went forth on long journeys; and those by sea.

“A night and a day I have been in the deep.” Some say this means out on the open sea, others, swimming upon it, which is also the truer interpretation. There is nothing wonderful, at least, about the former, nor would he have placed it as greater than his shipwrecks.

Ver. 26. “In perils of rivers.”

For he was compelled also to cross rivers. “In perils of robbers, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness.” “Everywhere were contests set before me, in places, in countries, in cities, in deserts.”

“In perils from the Gentiles, in perils amongst false brethren.”

Behold another kind of warfare. For not only did such as were enemies strike at him, but those also who played the hypocrite; and he had need of much firmness, much prudence.

[2.] Ver. 27. “In labor and travail.”

Perils succeed to labors, labors to perils, one upon other and unintermitted, and allowed him not to take breath even for a little.

Ver. 27, 28. “In journeyings often, in hunger and thirst and nakedness, besides those things that are without.”

What is left out is more than what is enumerated. Yea rather, one cannot count the number of those even which are enumerated; for he has not set them down specifically, but has mentioned those the number of which was small and easily comprehended, saying, “thrice” and “thrice,” (Ver. 25.) and [again] “once;” but of the others he does not mention the number because he had endured them often. And he recounts not their results as that he had converted so many and so many, but only what he suffered on behalf of the Preaching; at once out of modesty, and as showing that even should nothing have been gained but labor, even so his title to wages has been fulfilled.

“That which presseth upon me daily.” The tumults, the disturbances, the assaults of mobs, onsets of cities. For the Jews waged war against this man most of all because he most of all confounded them, and his changing sides all at once was the greatest refutation of their madness. And there breathed a mighty war against him, from his own people, from strangers, from false brethren; and every where were billows and precipices, in the inhabited world, in the uninhabited, by land, by sea, without, within. And he had not even a full supply of necessary food, nor even of thin clothing, but the champion of the world wrestled in nakedness and fought in hunger; so far was he from enriching himself. Yet he murmured not, but was grateful for these things to the Judge of the combat.

“Anxiety for all the Churches.” This was the chief thing of all, that his soul too was distracted, and his thoughts divided. For even if nothing from without had assailed him; yet the war within was enough, those waves on waves, that sleet of cares, that war of thoughts. For if one that hath charge of but a single house, and hath servants and superintendents and stewards, often cannot take breath for cares, though there be none that molests him: he that hath the care not of a single house, but of cities and peoples and nations and of the whole world; and in respect to such great concerns, and with so many spitefully entreating him, and single-handed, and suffering so many things, and so tenderly concerned as not even a father is for his children—consider what he endured. For that thou mayest not say, What if he was anxious, yet the anxiety was slight, he added further the intensity of the care, saying,

Ver. 29. “Who is weak, and I am not weak?” He did not say, ‘and I share not in his dejection?’ but, ‘so am I troubled and disturbed, as though I myself were laboring under that very affection, that very infirmity.’

“Who is made to stumble, and I burn not?” See, again, how he places before us the excess of his grief by calling it “burning.” ‘I am on fire,’ ‘I am in a flame,’ he says, which is surely greater than any thing he has said. For those other things, although violent, yet both pass quickly by, and brought with them that pleasure which is unfading; but this was what afflicted and straightened him, and pierced his mind through and through; the suffering such things for each one of the weak, whosoever he might be. For he did not feel pained for the greater sort only and despise the lesser, but counted even the abject amongst his

familiar friends. Wherefore also he said, “who is weak?” whosoever he may be; and as though he were himself the Church throughout the world, so was he distressed for every member.

Ver. 30. “If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern my weakness.”

Seest thou that he no where glorieth of miracles, but of his persecutions and his trials? For this is meant by “weaknesses.” And he shows that his warfare was of a diversified character. For both the Jews warred upon him, and the Gentiles stood against him, and the false brethren fought with him, and brethren caused him sorrow, through their weakness and by taking offense:-on every side he found trouble and disturbance, from friends and from strangers. This is the especial mark of an Apostle, by these things is the Gospel woven.

Ver. 31, 32. “The God and Father of the Lord Jesus knoweth that I lie not. The Governor under Aretas the king guarded the city of the Damascenes, desiring to apprehend me.”

What can be the reason that he here strongly confirms and gives assurance of [his truth], seeing he did not so in respect to any of the former things? Because, perhaps, this was of older date and not so well known; whilst of those other facts, his care for the churches, and all the rest, they were themselves cognisant. See then how great the war [against him] was, since on his account the city was “guarded.” And when I say this of the war, I say it of the zeal of Paul; for except this had breathed intensely, it had not kindled the governor to so great madness. These things are the part of an apostolic soul, to suffer so great things and yet in nothing to veer about, but to bear nobly whatever befalls; yet not to go out to meet dangers, nor to rush upon them. See for instance here, how he was content to evade the siege, by being “let down through a window in a basket.” For though he were even desirous “to depart hence;” still nevertheless he also passionately affected the salvation of men. And therefore he oft times had recourse even to such devices as these, preserving himself for the Preaching; and he refused not to use even human contrivances when the occasion called for them; so sober and watchful was he. For in cases where evils were inevitable, he needed only grace; but where the trial was of a measured character, he devises many things of himself even, here again ascribing the whole to God. And just as a spark of unquenchable fire, if it fell into the sea, would be merged as many waves swept over it, yet would again rise shining to the surface; even so surely the blessed Paul also would now be overwhelmed by perils, and now again, having dived through them, would come up more radiant, overcoming by suffering evil.

For this is the brilliant victory, this is the Church’s trophy, thus is the Devil overthrown when we suffer injury. For when we suffer, he is taken captive; and himself suffers harm, when he would fain inflict it on us. And this happened in Paul’s case also; and the more he plied him with perils, the more was he defeated. Nor did he raise up against him only one kind of trials, but various and diverse. For some involved labor, others sorrow, others fear, others pain, others care, others shame, others all these at once; but yet he was victorious in all. And like as if a single soldier, having the whole world fighting against him, should move through the mid ranks of his enemies, and suffer no harm: even so did Paul, showing himself singly, among barbarians, among Greeks, on every land, on every sea, abide unconquered. And as a spark, falling upon reeds and hay, changes into its own nature the things so kindled; so also did this man setting upon all make things changeover unto the truth; like a winter torrent, sweeping over all things and overturning every obstacle. And like some champion who wrestles, runs, and boxes too; or soldier engaged by turns in storming, fighting on foot, on shipboard; so did he try by turns every form of fight, and breathed out fire, and was unapproachable by all; with his single body taking possession of the world, with his single tongue putting all to flight. Not with such force did those many trumpets fall upon the stones of Jericho and throw them down, as did the sound of this man’s voice both dash to the earth the devil’s strong-holds and bring over to himself those that were against him. And when he had collected a multitude of captives, having armed the same, he made them again his own army, and by their means conquered. Wonderful was David who laid Goliath low with a single stone; but if thou wilt examine Paul’s achievements, that is a child’s exploit, and great as is the difference between a shepherd and a general, so great the difference thou shall see here. For this man brought down no Goliath by the hurling

of a stone, but by speaking only he scattered the whole array of the Devil; as a lion roaring and darting out flame from his tongue, so was he found by all irresistible; and bounded everywhere by turns continually; he ran to these, he came to those, he turned about to these, he bounded away to others, swifter in his attack than the wind; governing the whole world, as though a single house or a single ship; rescuing the sinking, steadying the dizzied, cheering the sailors, sitting at the tiller, keeping an eye to the prow, tightening the yards, handling an oar, pulling at the mast, watching the sky; being all things in himself, both sailor, and pilot, and pilot's mate, and sail, and ship; and suffering all things in order to relieve the evils of others. For consider. He endured shipwreck that he might stay the shipwreck of the world; "a day and a night he passed in the deep," that he might draw it up from the deep of error; he was "in weariness" that he might refresh the weary; he endured smiting that he might heal those that had been smitten of the devil; he passed his time in prisons that he might lead forth to the light those that were sitting in prison and in darkness; he was "in deaths oft" that he might deliver from grievous deaths; "five times he received forty stripes save one" that he might free those that inflicted them from the scourge of the devil; he was "beaten with rods" that he might bring them under "the rod and the staff" of Christ; (Psalms chapter 23, verse 4) he "was stoned," that he might deliver them from the senseless stones; he "was in the wilderness, that he might take them out of the wilderness; "in journeying," to stay their wanderings and open the way that leadeth to heaven; he "was in perils in the cities," that he might show the city which is above; "in hunger and thirst," to deliver from a more grievous hunger; "in nakedness," to clothe their unseemliness with the robe of Christ; set upon by the mob, to extricate them from the besetment of fiends; he burned, that he might quench the burning darts of the devil: "through a window was let down from the wall," to send up from below those that lay prostrate upon the ground. Shall we then talk any more, seeing we do not so much as know what Paul suffered? Shall we make mention any more of goods, or even of wife, or city, or freedom, when we have seen him ten thousand times despising even life itself? The martyr dies once for all: but that blessed saint in his one body and one soul endured so many perils as were enough to disturb even a soul of adamant; and what things all the saints together have suffered in so many bodies, those all he himself endured in one: he entered into the world as if a race-course, and stripped himself of all, and so made a noble stand. For he knew the fiends that were wrestling with him. Wherefore also he shone forth brightly at once from the beginning, from the very starting-post, and even to the end he continued the same; yea, rather he even increased the intensity of his pursuit as he drew nearer to the prize. And what surely is wonderful is that though suffering and doing such great things, he knew how to maintain an exceeding modesty. For when he was driven upon the necessity of relating his own good deeds, he ran quickly over them all; although he might have filled books without number, had he wished to unfold in detail every thing he mentioned; if he had specified the Churches he was in care for, if his prisons and his achievements in them, if of the other things one by one, the besetments, the assaults. But he would not. Knowing then these things, let us also learn to be modest and not to glory at any time in wealth or other worldly things, but in the reproaches we suffer for Christ's sake, and in these, only when need compels; for if there be nothing urging it, let us not mention these even, (lest we be puffed up,) but our sins only. For so shall we both easily be released from them and shall have God propitious to us, and shall attain the life to come; whereunto may we all attain through the grace and love towards men of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father, with the Holy Ghost, be glory, might, honor, now and for ever, and world without end. Amen

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