

Sermon on the Occasion of an Earthquake

by St. John Chrysostom

Our father among the saints John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, was a notable Christian bishop and preacher from the fourth and fifth centuries in Syria and Constantinople. He is famous for eloquence in public speaking and his denunciation of abuse of authority in the Church and in the Roman Empire of the time. His banishments demonstrated that secular powers had strong influence in the eastern Church at this period in history.

Taken from the book On Wealth and Poverty, By John Chrysostom, published by St. Vladimir Seminary Press, this is a most timely sermon.

Have you seen God's power, have you seen God's love for mankind?

His **power**, because He shook the world;

His **love**, because He made the tottering world firm again; or rather, you saw both His power and His love in both.

For **the earthquake** showed His power, and **its cessation** showed His love, because He shook the earth and made the world fast again, because He set it upright when it was rocking and about to fall. The earthquake has gone by, but **let the fear remain**; that tossing has run its course, do not let discretion depart with it.

We spent three days in prayer; let us not relax our zeal. This is why the earth quake came: **because of our laxity**.

We **relaxed**, and we summoned the earthquake;
we **renewed our zeal**, and we drove away His anger.

Let us not relax again, or we may again summon His anger and His retribution.

For God does not desire the death of the sinner, but that he should repent and live. **Have you seen the mortality of the human race?** When the earthquake came, I reflected with myself and said,

where is theft?

Where is greed?

Where is tyranny?

Where is arrogance?

Where is domination?

Where is oppression?

Where is the plundering of the poor?

Where is the arrogance of the rich?

Where is the domination of the powerful?

Where is intimidation?

Where is fear?

One moment of time and everything was torn apart more easily than a spider's web, everything was shattered, the city was full of shrieking, and **everyone ran to the church.**

Consider, if God had chosen to demolish everything, what we would have suffered. I say this, so that the fear of these events may remain sharp in you and may keep everyone's resolution firm. He shook us, but He did not destroy us. If He had wished to destroy us, He would not have shaken us. But since He did not wish to destroy us, the earthquake came in advance **like a herald, forewarning everyone of the anger of God,** in order that we might be **improved by fear** and prevent the actual retribution. He has done this even for foreign nations.

From the O.T. book of Jonah we read;

“Yet three days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

Why do You not overthrow the city?

You threaten to destroy it, and why do You not destroy it?

“Because I do not wish to destroy, for this very reason I threaten.”

So what do You say?

“Lest I do what I say, let My word go in advance and prevent My deed.”

“Yet three days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown;”

Then the prophet spoke, today the walls send out a voice. I say this, and I do not cease saying it, both to the poor and to the rich: consider how great God’s anger is, how easy and simple everything is to Him; and **let us abstain from evil!** In a brief moment of time He shattered the mind and resolution of each one of us, and He shook the foundations of our hearts.

Let us consider, if on that terrible day, when instead of one moment of time there will be endless ages,

rivers of fire,

threatening anger,

powers dragging us to judgment,

a terrible judgment seat,

an incorruptible court,

and the deeds of each one set before our eyes, no one to help, neither neighbor, nor counsel, nor relative, not a brother, not a

father, not a mother, not a friend, not anyone else— **what will we do then?** Tell me.

I bring fear to you in order to prepare your salvation.

I have wrought a lesson sharper than steel, so that each of you who has a gangrenous sore may cut it away. **Have I not been asking all along, as I ask now, and do not cease asking, how long will you be attached to the things of this world?** I am speaking to all of you, but especially to those who are ill and do not heed what I say. Or rather, the sermon is useful for each of you: for the ill person, to make him well, and for the healthy person, to keep him from falling ill.

How long does money last?

How long does wealth?

How long ostentatious houses?

How long the frenzied quest for pleasure in material things?

See, the earthquake came: **how did wealth help anyone?** The labor of both rich and poor was shattered.

The possession perished along with the possessor,

the house along with the builder.

The city became the common tomb of all, a tomb not constructed by the hands of craftsmen but prepared by the disaster itself.

Where was wealth?

Where was greed?

Do you see that everything was slighter than a spider's web?

Did you see how in a brief moment of time He brought everything together?

So think over continually in yourselves that evening of the earthquake. Everyone else was afraid **because of the earthquake**, but I was afraid **because of the cause** of the **earthquake**. **Do you understand what I mean?** They were afraid that the city would collapse, and they would die; but I am afraid that the Master is angry with us. Death is not grievous, but it is grievous to provoke the Master.

So I was not afraid because of the earthquake, but because of the cause of the earthquake; for the cause of the earthquake was **the**

anger of God, and **the cause of His anger was our sins**.

Never fear punishment, but **fear sin** the mother of punishment. **Is the city being shaken? What of it?** But do not let your resolution be shaken. In the case of diseases and injuries we do not grieve for those who are being cured, but for those who have incurable diseases. **Sin** is the same as disease or injury; **retribution** is the same as surgery or medicine.

Do you understand what I am saying?

Pay attention: I want to teach you a word of wisdom. **Why do we grieve for those who are being punished, but not for those who are sinning?**

Punishment is not as grievous as sin, for sin is the reason for the punishment. If you see someone with a putrefying sore, and worms and discharges coming from his body, and you see him neglecting his infection, but you see another person with the same affliction benefiting from the hands of physicians, from cautery and surgery and bitter-tasting medicines, **for whom will you grieve?**

Tell me, **for the one who is ill and is not being treated, or for the one who is ill and is being treated?** In the same way imagine two sinners, one being punished, the other not being punished. Do not say, this one is lucky because he is rich, he strips orphans of their property, and he oppresses widows.

Apparently he is not ill, he has a good reputation in spite of his thefts, he enjoys honor and authority, he does not endure any of the troubles which afflict mankind—no fever, no paralysis, nor any other disease—a chorus of children surrounds him, his old age is comfortable; but you should **grieve most for him**, because he is indeed ill and receives no treatment. I shall tell you how.

If you see someone afflicted with dropsy an edema, his body swollen with a painful spleen, and not hurrying to the doctor, but drinking cold water, keeping a Sybaritic table characterized by or loving luxury or sensuous pleasure, getting drunk every day, surrounded with body-guards, and aggravating his disease, tell me, **do you call him lucky or unlucky?** If you see another person afflicted with a sickness, benefiting from the care of doctors, purging himself with hunger, with great difficulty

braving his bitter medicines which are painful but bring forth **health through pain**, **do you not call this person more fortunate than the other?**

It is agreed: for one is ill and is not treated, but the other is ill and benefits from treatment. But, you may say, **the treatment is painful**. But **its purpose is beneficial**.

Our present life is like this also, but you must change the words from

bodies to souls,

from diseases to sins,

from the bitter taste of medicines to the retribution and judgment from God. What the medicines, surgery, and cautery are for the physician, chastisement is for God.

Just as fire is often used to cauterize, to prevent the spread of infection, and as the steel removes decayed flesh, bringing pain but providing benefit, so hunger and disease, and other apparent evils, are used on the soul instead of steel and fire to prevent the spread of disease, by analogy with the body, and to make it better.