John Chrysostom: Legendary Early Church Preacher

Christian History Magazine
ISSUE 44

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Did You Know?

Little-known and remarkable facts about John Chrysostom

The Greek name *Chrysostom*, meaning "Golden Mouth," was not given to John until 150 years after his death. The name stuck because of his greatness as a preacher.

John was forced to become bishop of Constantinople. He had served in Antioch as a priest for 14 years when one day military officials, under orders from an imperial official, kidnapped him. He was transported to the capital and ordained. Chrysostom accepted these events as God's providence.

Chrysostom was educated by one of the leading pagan teachers of his day, Libanius. In his writings, John cites more than 15 ancient Greek philosophers, including at least 30 references to Plato.

In keeping with his era, John favored a cappella singing in worship and opposed the use of musical instruments. Instruments were allowed in the Old Testament to entice people to attend worship, he said, but Christians shouldn't need such inducements.

As a youth, Chrysostom said he "plunged into the whirlpool of the world." His favorite pastime was the theater, which was noted for its bawdiness. He would later preach stinging indictments against such entertainment.

Christmas first appeared as a special feast during John's life. It was celebrated at Antioch for the first time about 378, eight years before Chrysostom was ordained there.

In his writings, John refers to the New Testament 11,000 times, yet he never cites 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, or Revelation. These books were not part of the New Testaments that circulated in fourth-century Antioch.

Despite his popularity, John sometimes became discouraged with the seeming deafness of his listeners as they failed to apply the truths he spoke week after week. He once complained, "My work is like that of a man who is trying to clean a piece of ground into which a muddy stream is constantly flowing."

Though he occasionally praised the Jews, Chrysostom often called them "wretched" and "good-for-nothing" and worse. His vitriolic rhetoric was designed to dissuade Christians from superstitiously following Jewish practices, a problem in his day. Unfortunately, his anti-Jewish harangues were later used to justify violence against Jews.

In John's day, only about half the population of major cities like Antioch and Constantinople were Christian. Yet Christianity was rapidly becoming the official religion: Sundays were declared state and legal holidays; pagan festivals were abolished; the theater and circus were forbidden on Sunday; and finally, all pagan temples were closed and pagan sacrifice forbidden.

Chrysostom rarely attacked the institution of slavery as such, though he did once say, "Slavery is only the result of sin. Only avarice, envy, and insatiability have produced it." He told fellow Christians, "Why do you need such a swarm of slaves? Give them their freedom! But in any case, know that it is inhuman to strike a slave or put him in chains."

When John became archbishop of Constantinople, he sold expensive works of art his predecessors had acquired. He refused to give lavish dinner parties, nor did he ride around in a chariot or frequent the imperial palace. In the first year alone, Chrysostom saved enough in household expenses to build a hospital.

John was twice banished from Constantinople. His first exile lasted but a few days; an earthquake in the capital convinced the empress, who had arranged John's removal, to beg him to return. His second exile, though, lasted three years, physically wore him down, and finally killed him.

Chrysostom was such a popular preacher that sometimes people pushed and shoved their way toward the front of the church to hear him better.

Chrysostom had a habit of striking his right forefinger into his left hand when he was about to say something critical of someone or something.

Following Chrysostom's banishment, those loyal to him became known as Johnites. They were persecuted but persisted as a separate church until 438, when Chrysostom's bones were returned in honor to Constantinople.

More than 600 sermons and 200 letters of Chrysostom survive. His sermons on the Book of Acts are the only surviving commentary on that book from the first 1,000 years of Christianity.

From the Editor—Admiring the Fire

John Chrysostom is a leading candidate for the most remarkable yet unknown figure in church history. Preachers may hear about him in seminary—as the golden-tongued preacher or the chief practitioner of "Antiochene exegesis"—but that's about as much as any of us knows.

John's relative anonymity is hard to fathom. When you study him and his era, you keep bumping into wild monks, unruly crowds, sleazy bishops, and capricious emperors. You watch intrigue, duplicity, and murder. You hear glorious oratory and witness steadfast conviction on a slow, cruel march to the death.

Why Hollywood hasn't capitalized on this story, I don't know. In the meantime, we will. We may want to quibble with John about some doctrines and practices. But at the center of his being is a dynamic and courageous faith that deserves to be praised.

And feared. The fact is, John's life and preaching not only inspire, they also convict. There was a fire in John's gut; he loved Jesus Christ and had little patience with Christians who did not lay every ounce of body, mind, and soul at Jesus' feet. As much as I'm drawn by his spiritual fire, I have to admit, I'm hesitant to get too close lest I get singed.

After John's death, one of his admirers wrote, "It would be a great thing to attain to his stature, but it would be hard. Nevertheless even the following of him is lovely and magnificent." And scary.

Golden Tongue and Iron Will

His eloquent preaching and uncompromising views brought John Chrysostom immediate fame—and eventual exile.

John Chrysostom had little patience with sins of any sort, but he was especially piqued at the misuse of wealth:

"It is foolishness and a public madness," he once preached, "to fill the cupboards with clothing and allow men who are created in God's image and our likeness to stand naked and trembling with the cold so that they can hardly hold themselves upright.… You are large and fat, you hold drinking parties until late at night, and sleep in a warm, soft bed. And do you not think of how you must give an account of your misuse of the gifts of God?"

This type of preaching—eloquent and uncompromising—would eventually earn John of Antioch the name by which he is now distinguished: *Chrysostomos*, "the golden mouth." It would also contribute, though, to his exile and premature death.

Pleading Mother

Anthusa, a pious Christian woman, gave birth to her only son near the middle of the fourth century in Antioch, the city where the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians." Her husband, Secundus, a senior government official, died when she was about 20, leaving her with John and a daughter, both quite young. Shunning remarriage, Anthusa devoted the rest of her life to her children.

John was given the best education available in Antioch, a leading intellectual center of the day. He studied under Libanius, the famous pagan rhetorician. Rhetoric—the practice of public address used in the courts and politics—was the leading science of the era; teachers of rhetoric were the pride of every major city. Libanius had traveled the world, having been a professor in Athens and Constantinople; he believed in the pagan cults and disdained Christianity.

John apparently was planning a career in law. But sometime in the years of his formal education, he determined to give himself to the service of God, first by going into monastic seclusion. Like many in his day, he longed for a time apart from the world to grow closer to God. But his mother begged him to wait.

She took him to the room where he was born and in tears told him the one thing that made her widowhood easier was that John resembled his father. She reminded him that the young have their lives in front of them but that she would soon face death. She asked him to spare her a second loneliness and not leave her before she died.

"When you have committed me to the ground and united me with your father's bones," she pleaded, "then set out on your long travels and sail whatever sea you please. Then there will be nobody to hinder. But until I breathe my last, be content to live with me."

John relented and put off his plans for a few years.

Dodging Responsibility

In the early 370s, after his mother died, John entered monastic seclusion. He studied under the monk Diodore for a time and then lived as a hermit. John's ascetic rigors were so strenuous they damaged his health for the rest of his life. Still, this period hardened his spiritual resolve and focused his calling. In addition, he memorized large passages of Scripture, and his ability to quote passages from memory would empower his later sermons.

Though John eventually rejected monastic life for service in the church, he always prized contemplation. In one later sermon, he asked, "For what purpose did Christ go up into the mountain? To teach us that loneliness and retirement is good when we are to pray to God.… For the wilderness is the mother of quiet; it is a calm and a harbor, delivering us from all turmoils."

Before he had left for seclusion in the nearby hills, John had been ordained a "lector," a minor church official responsible for reading Scripture in worship. When he returned, he became active in the church of Antioch, serving under Meletius and then Flavian, successive archbishops. Both had suffered for their orthodoxy when Arians (who denied the divinity of Christ) had controlled church and state.

During this time, John and a close friend named Basil heard they were being considered for the ministry. Both felt inadequate for the heavy responsibility, but Basil finally agreed to be ordained when John implied they would do so together. Basil went forward with ordination—unaware that John had gone into hiding. John feared the demanding responsibility of the priestly office, but he did not want to deprive the church of Basil.

This act of duplicity led John to write one of his most famous works, *On the Priesthood*, a justification of his deception and his dodging of the office he esteemed. It also contains glimpses of his core values and a mature philosophy of ministry—though John wrote it in when only in his twenties. For example: "I do not know whether anyone has ever succeeded in not enjoying praise. And if he enjoys it, he naturally wants to receive it. And if he wants to receive it, he cannot help being pained and distraught at losing it.… Men who are in love with applause have their spirits starved not only when they are blamed offhand, but even when they fail to be constantly praised."

Eventually, John was ordained a deacon (381) and finally a priest (386). Basil probably became bishop of a rural town in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). John, though, would eventually minister in one of the largest churches in Christendom.

Painfully Specific

First, however, John spent twelve years in Antioch, a city of great wealth and the capital of Syria. It was known for its Olympic games, theatrical presentations, and festivals. It was also the city where Chrysostom's preaching began to be noticed, especially after the infamous Affair of the Statues.

In the spring of 388, a rebellion erupted in Antioch over the announcement of increased taxes. Statues of the emperor and his recently deceased wife were desecrated. Officials of the empire then began punishing city leaders, killing some, for the uprising. While Archbishop Flavian rushed to the capital in Constantinople 800 miles away to beg for clemency, John preached to a city in turmoil:

"Improve yourselves now truly, not as when during one of the numerous earthquakes or in famine or drought or in similar visitations you leave off your sinning for three or four days and then begin the old life again.… Stop evil slandering, harbor no enmities, and give up the wicked custom of frivolous cursing and swearing. If you do this, you will surely be delivered from the present distress and attain eternal happiness."

After eight weeks, on the day before Easter, Flavian returned with the good news of the emperor's pardon.

John preached through many of Paul's letters ("I like all the saints," he said, "but St. Paul the most of all—that vessel of election, the trumpet of heaven"), the Gospels of Matthew and of John, and the Book of Genesis. Changed lives were his goal, and he denounced sins from abortion to prostitution and from gluttony to swearing.

He encouraged his congregation not only to attend the divine service regularly but also to feed themselves on God's written Word. In a sermon on the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, he said, "Reading the Scripture is a great means of security against sinning. The ignorance of Scripture is a great cliff and a deep abyss; to know nothing of the divine laws is a great betrayal of salvation."

His applications could be forceful. About people's love of horse racing, he complained, "My sermons are applauded merely from custom, then everyone runs off to [horse racing] again and gives much more applause to the jockeys, showing indeed unrestrained passion for them! There they put their heads together with great attention, and say with mutual rivalry, 'This horse did not run well, this one stumbled,' and one holds to this jockey and another to that. No one thinks any more of my sermons, nor of the holy and awesome mysteries that are accomplished here."

Kidnapped

In early 398, John was taken by a senior military official to a chapel outside the city's walls. There he was seized by soldiers and transported 800 miles to the capital, where he was forcibly consecrated as archbishop of Constantinople.

John's kidnapping was arranged by Eutropius, a government official, who wanted to adorn the church in the capital city with the best orator in Christianity. John had never sought the office, but he accepted it as God's providence.

The archbishop in the capital of the eastern empire could be a potent force for Christianity. John's oratorical skills were second to none, and he had the potential of building a power base that would have enabled him to reform the city for decades. In his first few years, in fact, John saw two key victories for the church.

The first came when Eutropius fell from power. John had already taken aim at the extravagances that marked the ruling class. So when Eutropius fled to the church for sanctuary (believing the emperor sought his execution), it was a great vindication for John.

The following Sunday, while Eutropius stood in front of the congregation, John began his sermon, "O vanity of vanities; all is vanity!"

After rebuking Eutropius for his worldly behavior, John turned to the people: "I say this now, not in order to shame the fallen, but to exhort to prudence those who are still upright; not in order to push a shipwrecked person into the deep, but to warn the others before they are also shipwrecked."

After the sermon, John worked out with Emperor Arcadius an agreement to save the fallen official's life. (Eutropius, however, later broke the agreement and was beheaded.)

John's second victory came the next year, in 400. Gainas, an imperial general in charge of an army of Goth mercenaries, threatened to revolt and take over the city. He took three prominent officials as hostages. He also demanded that his troops, Arians by faith, be given a church in the capital in which to hold services. (Arianism had been condemned and outlawed 19 years earlier.)

Chrysostom inserted himself into the situation and negotiated the release of the hostages. Then he convinced the emperor to refuse Gainas's request for a church. The political and military momentum turned, and Gainas was defeated.

Afflicting the Comfortable

Within three years, however, John found himself in deep trouble.

John's blend of strengths and weaknesses had been ideally suited to his ministry at Antioch. His enthusiasm for the Christian life, his oratorical skills, and his knowledge of the Scriptures powered his preaching to great heights. Under the tactful, politically skillful leadership of archbishops Meletius and Flavian, the church at Antioch thrived.

In the capital city, however, the situation was more difficult for John. Archbishops controlled vast wealth, lived in palaces, and led thousands of church officials. By Chrysostom's day, the churches in Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople each had approximately 100,000 members and hundreds of officers of various ranks. The coupling of economic and political power with the church's spiritual mandate attracted some people into ministry with wrong motives.

John's preaching against abuses of wealth and power affronted the imperial family and the ruling class. He was not skilled in church politics, and his lifestyle itself was a scandal to them: he lived an ascetic life, used his considerable household budget to care for the poor, and built hospitals. Furthermore, he always ate by himself, refusing to take part in the social life of the capital, which would have given him better relationships with those in power.

John's reforms began with celibate clergy who lived with "spiritual sisters"—single women who lived in monks' residences to tend to domestic matters. He preached that some of the "spiritual sisters" became "spiritual mothers."

John also ordered reforms in the order of widows: he advised some to enter a second marriage, and for those who remained in church service, he instituted stricter standards. He also disciplined bishops in Asia Minor for simony and financial misappropriation.

John exhorted his people to pray daily, and he held evening services for those who had to work during the day. He preached against the great public sins: horse racing and gambling, public swearing and vulgarity, and the indulgent use of wealth.

For example, in a sermon against the theater, he said: "If you see a shameless woman in the theater, who treads the stage with uncovered head and bold attitudes, dressed in garments adorned with gold, flaunting her soft sensuality, singing immoral songs, throwing her limbs about in the dance, and making shameless speeches … do you still dare to say that nothing human happens to you then? Long after the theater is closed and everyone is gone away, those images still float before your soul, their words, their conduct, their glances, their walk, their positions, their excitation, their unchaste limbs—and as for you, you go home covered with a thousand wounds! But not alone—the whore goes with you—although not openly and visibly … but in your heart, and in your conscience, and there within you she kindles the Babylonian furnace … in which the peace of your home, the purity of your heart, the happiness of your marriage will be burnt up!"

The horse track in Constantinople was across the main square from the church where John preached, and he often condemned the noise that interrupted the services: "Still there are those who simply leave us here alone and run off to the circus and the charioteers and the horse races! So far have they yielded to their passions that they fill the whole city with their cries and unrestrained yelling, at which one would have to laugh if it were not so sad."

More than once, he threatened to withhold Communion from those who continued in immorality: "If some will still persevere in their moral corruption, they will finally be separated and cut off.… They will be excluded from the congregation. If you shudder with horror at this judgment, then let the guilty ones simply show repentance, and the judgment will be lifted."

Illegitimate Synod

Ironically, John's most formidable enemy turned out to be someone far outside his jurisdiction: Theophilus, the archbishop of Alexandria. Theophilus's hatred of John was doubly fueled. John had been consecrated bishop of Constantinople rather than his own candidate; furthermore, the influence of the Constantinople church had for some years been growing at the expense of his own in Alexandria.

Politically, John was no match for Theophilus and his allies. Even though John's powerful preaching drew great crowds, Theophilus's party easily mobilized the imperial couple and the ruling class against Chrysostom.

In the spring of 403, Theophilus's opportunity came. John welcomed four monks (the so-called "Tall Brothers") who had opposed Theophilus's management of church funds (Theophilus had a reputation for expensive building programs and for living lavishly). Theophilus, in turn, charged the monks with heresy, contending they adhered to the then-condemned views of Origen, the third-century theologian. John asked Theophilus to provide evidence for the charges.

When Theophilus came to Constantinople, he brought enough Egyptian bishops to declare a church council, which he quickly did, at an estate across the Bosporus from Constantinople. The illegitimate council forgot the four monks and proceeded to condemn John, based on trumped-up charges brought against him by disaffected clergy. He was deposed from the office of archbishop, and Emperor Arcadius removed him from the city.

When news got out, a riot erupted, and within days John was brought back and reinstated. Theophilus retreated to Alexandria.

Unfortunately, John again quickly alienated Empress Eudoxia with his preaching. Emperor Arcadius ordered John to leave the church and the city. John retorted that rulers could use force to remove a shepherd from his flock but no minister should abandon his divine calling.

Eventually troops were sent.

John, to forestall another riot, cooperated. To distract the people, he had his horse saddled and put by the public entrance to the cathedral. He then said farewell to loyal deaconesses and priests and left through a side door.

After his removal was discovered, the people again rioted, and somehow the cathedral church was set on fire; the flames spread to the senate house and other public buildings. Imperial troops forcefully put down all resistance. Some of John's followers were tortured and at least two died as a result.

Exile

John was transported across the plains of Asia Minor in the heat of summer but was allowed to stop in Caesarea because of failing health. He was visited by many loyal followers and was popular among the Christians in that region. He wrote letters to Olympias, his closest deaconess in Constantinople, describing the hard times he had endured and reminding her that God was in control:

"When you see the church scattered, suffering the most terrible trials, her most illustrious members persecuted and flogged, her leader carried away into exile, don't only consider these events, but also the things that have resulted: the rewards, the recompense, the awards for the athlete who wins in the games and the prizes won in the contest."

Orders were given for him to be moved, this time to a remote village on the eastern shore of the Black Sea. But with his health failing, he collapsed on the way, on September 14, 407, and was taken to a small chapel outside of Comana. After he was dressed in a baptismal robe, he gave away his clothes to local villagers. He received the Lord's Supper and offered a final prayer that

ended with his usual closing words, “Glory be to God in all things. Amen.” He was buried in the small chapel at the end of the empire.

After John had been deposed, many of his supporters, called “Johnites,” were driven into exile. Palladius, a bishop and friend of John, wrote a biographical defense of his friend. John himself wrote a letter to Innocent, archbishop of Rome, and other western bishops. These western leaders wanted to call a synod to investigate the matter but were politically powerless to force such a decision on the emperor in Constantinople.

Thirty-four years later, though, after John’s chief enemies had died, his relics were brought back in triumph to the capital. Emperor Theodosius II publicly asked forgiveness for the sins of his parents, who had sent John into exile.

The Gallery—Politicos, Pagans, and the Pious

Five people who reveal Chrysostom’s holy and violent era.

Eudoxia (d. 404)

Avaricious empress

Early in John’s career in Constantinople, Eudoxia was one of his powerful supporters. She spent long hours with him, and he baptized her son. When the relics of some saint were moved to a chapel outside the city, Eudoxia joined the procession, barefoot, without her veil or any trappings of royalty, with every outward sign of piety.

Her inner strength could have turned her toward being a saint; instead it turned her toward a quest for power and the destruction of her enemies, including John.

Eudoxia married Emperor Arcadius in 395 and quickly discovered that Arcadius was weak and dominated by Eutropius, a leading official. Eudoxia wanted to be named Augusta (empress), a move Eutropius opposed. Determined to gain more power, she began to plot Eutropius’s downfall.

Her chance came in 399. Many generals resented Eutropius for his high-handed ways. Gothic mercenaries rebelled and demanded his expulsion. At the same time, in a heated argument, Eutropius told Eudoxia, in effect, “I raised you to power; I can just as easily break you.” Arcadius had Eutropius deposed. Soon she was named Augusta and became, effectively, the ruler of the empire.

Eudoxia now began to fear John’s power—he may have been the only man in the empire strong enough to oppose her. After John’s sermon on the vices of women (in 401), Eudoxia conspired with Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria to depose John.

A few days after John was put out of the city, however, an earthquake shook the region, damaging the imperial bedroom. Terrified of God’s evident wrath, Eudoxia begged John to return, affirming her regard for him and remembering his baptism of her son.

But more intrigue (and perhaps an indirect attack on Eudoxia by John in one of his sermons), ended the short truce. John was again sent into exile. A few weeks later, Eudoxia, due to complications in childbirth, died.

Libanius (314–395)

Brilliant pagan

Libanius was born in Antioch, studied in Athens, and then opened a controversial school in Constantinople. He was so popular, however, that his opponents had him expelled in 343 on the charge of practicing magic. He finally settled in Antioch in 354.

As a teacher, Libanius attracted and trained some of the key leaders of the day, including the Christians Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, as well as the famous pagan emperor Julian.

In Libanius's day, pagan culture was on the defensive, fighting for its life, and Libanius was one of its leading apologists. When Christian Emperor Theodosius began to destroy pagan temples, Libanius wrote a speech calling for their protection. And when Emperor Julian, who had tried to revive ancient paganism, was killed in Persia, Libanius composed a funeral oration. In it, he celebrated Julian's writings against the Christians, which he said demonstrated the "ridiculous and trifling character of their sacred books."

Libanius, though, was committed to justice and fairness, and against fanaticism and oppression. He gave himself to the plight of farmers and peasants. He continually called on the imperial administration to act justly toward the poor.

Although Libanius respected John, as well as John's mother, he died a committed pagan.

Olympias (361–408)

Devoted follower

When Olympias's parents died, she inherited a large fortune. Her uncle arranged her marriage with Nebridius, the prefect of Constantinople, whom she loved. The great theologian Gregory Nazianzus apologized for not being able to attend the wedding, an indication of Olympias's early reputation for piety.

Nebridius died a few years later, and Emperor Theodosius tried to get Olympias to marry his cousin. Olympias replied, "Had God wished me to remain a wife, he would not have taken Nebridius away." Theodosius was angered and had her money turned over to the urban prefect, who was to be her guardian until she was 30.

Olympias, however, wrote to the emperor, thanking him for freeing her from the burden of managing her money. She asked him to divide it between the poor and the church. Theodosius relented and gave back her property.

Olympias became a deaconess and established a convent in Constantinople. She was so famous for her generosity, John had to remind her about responsible stewardship. She was once described as "a wonderful woman … like a precious vase filled with the Holy Spirit."

She was also a dear and trusted friend of John. John put Olympias and her house under his protection, adding an orphanage and hospital to her convent. On behalf of John, she took in, fed, and sheltered the Tall Brothers and Isidore when they sought refuge in Constantinople. She was one of the last people to whom he said goodbye before his final exile. Her friends, it is reported, literally had to tear her from his feet.

After John's departure, Olympias suffered the same persecution as John's other friends. She was dragged before the tribunal and accused of setting fire to the cathedral. She was charged with refusing to be in communion with John's successor (whom she believed had been chosen unlawfully). Eventually, she was exiled and wandered about ill for one winter and spring. She was brought back to Constantinople and fined heavily, and her religious community was broken up.

Olympias died a few years later, one of a line of wealthy widows who have supported the work of monks and bishops, and one of the few who remained loyal to John in the face of persecution.

Eutropius (d. 399)

Conniving eunuch

Eutropius, a former slave and eunuch, became a civil servant under Emperor Theodosius and quickly rose in power. He became an ambassador and eventually civilian head of the state church.

Under the next emperor, Arcadius, Eutropius was responsible for making John archbishop of the capital—a move that would later save Eutropius's life, at least for a time.

Eutropius soon consolidated his power. He convinced Emperor Arcadius to marry Eudoxia rather than the daughter of the prefect Rufinus, who stood in the way of Eutropius's ambitions. Rufinus was later murdered, and Eutropius appropriated Rufinus's property and transferred some powers of the prefect to himself. He removed the best generals in the army and replaced them with men loyal to himself.

Soon, his grip on imperial power started to loosen. The commander of some mercenary Goth troops revolted, partly because Eutropius refused to give him a large enough gift for his services. The commander told the emperor that Eutropius must be deposed if there was to be peace again. Eutropius unfortunately chose this moment to quarrel with Empress Eudoxia.

Believing his life was in danger, Eutropius fled for sanctuary to Chrysostom's church (even though he, Eutropius, had earlier passed a law denying the right of sanctuary). Chrysostom publicly rebuked Eutropius's worldly ways. But in compassion, John approached the emperor and convinced him to spare Eutropius's life.

Eutropius was banished to Cyprus, but within a few months, he was brought back, convicted of wearing clothing having the imperial insignia, and beheaded.

Theophilus (c. 345–412)

Scheming bishop

As Christians became key players in the intrigues of fourth-century politics, it led to not a few ironies and tragedies. Take for example, the case of Theophilus, archbishop of Alexandria, whose high-handed tactics forced John, archbishop of Constantinople, into exile.

Two controversies reveal Theophilus's personality and the times in which John lived.

The first: A large party of Egyptian monks were troubled by the popular views of Origen (d. 254), who spiritualized many biblical passages. In reaction, these monks argued that God had a body; Scriptures that referred to God's "face," for example, should be taken literally.

Theophilus, archbishop of Alexandria, disagreed. He held that God was incorporeal and said so in one Easter letter to his churches. When the monks read it, they marched to Alexandria and incited a riot. Monks commanded great reverence from the people, so bishops had to retain their support. Faced with this tumult, Theophilus slyly said to the monks, "When I look upon you, it is as if I behold the face of God."

The monks insisted that Theophilus denounce publicly the works of Origen. This Theophilus did, a "change of heart" that would prove useful in a later controversy that would involve Chrysostom.

Tall Brothers affair

This controversy began because Theophilus was famous for grand building projects and infamous for taking money given for the poor and using it to build churches. One day Isidore, a revered priest and Theodosius's assistant responsible for charitable works, refused to hand over one such donation. Theophilus degraded him from his priestly office and threatened bodily harm.

Isidore fled to the desert, taking refuge with four monks called the "Tall Brothers." The Tall Brothers asked Theophilus to restore Isidore; Theophilus responded by jailing one of the monks. The Tall Brothers, in turn, went to the prison and staged a sitdown strike. Theophilus, furious at such maneuvering, accused the monks of following Origenism (only partly true), and convinced the civil authorities to drive them out of Egypt.

The Tall Brothers and Isidore eventually landed in Constantinople and sought the help of Chrysostom, who gave them hospitality while he researched their cause.

One day, as Empress Eudoxia rode through the city, the Tall Brothers approached her chariot and asked her to intercede for them. She replied, "Pray for the emperor, for me, for our children, and for the empire. For my part, I shall shortly cause a council to be convened, to which Theophilus shall be summoned."

Back in Alexandria, Theophilus no doubt fumed. Years earlier, Constantinople had replaced Alexandria as the "Second City" of Christendom. And when Constantinople's archbishoporic had become open, Theophilus's nomination was rejected in favor of Chrysostom. Theophilus had a long-standing grudge against Constantinople and Chrysostom, and now he had to defend himself in Constantinople against a former assistant he counted a traitor!

Great reverse

On his way to Constantinople, though, Theophilus persuaded various bishops to come with him, ostensibly to attend a conference to condemn Origenism. Theophilus arrived with a large body of priests and bishops who were either loyal to him or angry with John (for having disciplined them for their lax ways). Rather than be disciplined, Theophilus unilaterally convened his own synod (the so-called "Synod of the Oak") to condemn John! The charges? Among other things, Origenism.

John refused to appear, and he was summarily condemned. Meanwhile, Theophilus's party won the ear of the emperor, who drove John from the city.

When the people heard of John's banishment, riots erupted. Then an earthquake shook the city, which the empress interpreted as divine judgment. The emperor quickly had John returned, and Theophilus was forced to return to Alexandria.

After his death, Theophilus's nephew and successor, the great Cyril, preserved the better memory of Theophilus—he had earlier used his political acumen to fight paganism. Cyril was successful, for today the Coptic and Syrian churches consider Theophilus a saint.

The Christian History Timeline—John Chrysostom

The dates of John Chrysostom's birth and life until 381 are highly disputed. Many of his writings can be traced only to a general period in his life; the dates given here are generally accepted. Not all of his writings could be listed here.

EARLY YEARS 349–371

349 Born in Antioch of Syria to Christian parents Secundus and Anthusa
363–367 Studies rhetoric and literature under pagan teacher Libanius
368 (Easter) Baptized at Antioch
368–371 Studies in a kind of monastic school; may have assisted bishop Meletius of Antioch
c. 368–371 Writes *Comparison between a King and a Monk* and several other works in favor of monastic life
c. 371 Ordained lector and serves the church of Antioch

LECTOR & DEACON 372–385

372–378 Lives in a semi-isolated state and then as a hermit until bad health forces him to give up this way of life
378–381 Lector (reads Scripture in worship) at Antioch

380 or 381 Ordained deacon (assists with sacraments); writes treatise of consolation to a young widow
381–385 Writes *On the Priesthood*
380 or 382 Two treatises condemning the cohabitation of clerics and virgins

PRIEST OF ANTIOCH 386–397

385 or 386 Ordained priest by Bishop Flavian of Antioch
386–387 Preaches homilies (sermons) I-X *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* and *Against the Jews* (i.e., Christians who follow Jewish religious practices)
387 Antioch riots; John preaches sermons *On the Statues*
388 or 389 Eight instructions for baptismal candidates
390–397 Homilies on Genesis, Matthew, John, and 6 NT letters
397 Homilies on selected Psalms and on Isaiah

ARCHBISHOP OF CONSTANTINOPLE 398–403

398 Consecrated bishop of Constantinople. Takes steps to reform imperial court, clergy, and people; homilies XI–XII *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*
398–402 Homilies on Philippians and Colossians
399 Gives Eutropius sanctuary and preaches two homilies on the vanity of human power
400 Homilies on the Book of Acts
402 Group of Egyptian monks (the "Tall Brothers") appeal to John for help
403 John tried at the Synod of the Oak; convicted, deposed, and exiled; immediately recalled
403–404 Homilies on Hebrews

EXILE 404–407

404 Deposed and exiled to Cucusus (in eastern Turkey)
404–407 Writes more than 200 letters to friends
407 Sent to Pityus on the Black Sea and dies en route, at Comana in Pontus (in northeast Turkey)

State Falls, Church Rises

360–363 Emperor Julian ("the Apostate") attempts to restore pagan religion
379–395 Emperor Theodosius I ("the Great") gradually makes Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire
381 Council of Constantinople declares the Holy Spirit divine; Constantinople becomes second seat of Christendom (after Rome)
390 Theodosius orders massacre in Thessalonica; confronted by Ambrose of Milan, he publicly repents
394 Bishop Ninian sets out from Rome to convert Scotland
407 Roman legions in Britain withdraw to protect Italy
410 Visigoths under Alric sack Rome; empire is psychologically shaken
413 Augustine begins writing *City of God*, the classic philosophy of history, in response to Rome's sack

The Genius of Chrysostom's Preaching

Why people surged forward to hear John speak.

John Chrysostom loved to preach. "Preaching improves me," he once told his congregation. "When I begin to speak, weariness disappears; when I begin to teach, fatigue too disappears. Thus neither sickness itself nor indeed any other obstacle is able to separate me from your love.… For just as you are hungry to listen to me, so too I am hungry to preach to you."

And people loved to hear him preach, and since his death, to read his sermons. He was given the posthumous title of "Chrysostom" or "golden tongue," and it stuck. Pope Pius X in 1908 designated him as the "patron" of Christian preachers. And historian Hans von Campenhausen wrote that his sermons "are probably the only ones from the whole of Greek antiquity which … are still readable today as Christian sermons. They reflect something of the authentic life of the New Testament, just because they are so ethical, so simple, and so clear-headed."

What was it like to hear a Chrysostom sermon? What was it about his method, style, and content that established his reputation as one of the church's greatest preachers?

Standing Room Only

John preached every Sunday and saint's day in addition to conducting several weekday services, which accounts for the 800 sermons still available to us today.

He began his sermons with a prayer that many Christians still pray each Sunday: "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ, our Lord."

In the fourth century—indeed, until modern times—people did not sit in pews when they worshiped. Instead they stood or walked around, greeting people and exchanging news. It was to such a relatively unruly congregation that Chrysostom preached, and the people often responded with applause, or on occasion, with boos, hisses, or silence.

Chrysostom once observed that Christ did not have to contend with such ill-disciplined hearers, but the disciples always waited quietly and politely until he had finished. So John concluded his sermon by suggesting that all applause should henceforth be forbidden—and this announcement brought down the house with applause!

Though some of Chrysostom's sermons lasted more than two hours, other sermons (such as each of his 88 homilies on the Gospel of John) took less than thirty minutes to deliver.

In one of these sermons, we gain a glimpse of church life in John's day. Just before he gave the Gospel reading, he exhorted his people, "Each of you take in hand that part of the Gospels which is to be read in your presence on the first day of the week. Sit down at home and read it through; consider often and carefully its content, and examine all its parts well, noting what is clear and what is confusing. From such zeal there will be no small benefit to you and to me."

This suggests that his listeners were literate and possessed copies of the Gospels.

Sober Exposition

Though Chrysostom's delivery was dramatic, his biblical exposition was sober and restrained. He was the primary representative of "Antiochene exegesis," a method that emphasized the literal meaning of the Bible's text. This school opposed allegorical interpretations of the Bible, which were typical of the church in Alexandria. Allegorists, like the great Origen, went beyond the literal text to uncover spiritual meanings behind the numbers, colors, characters, and events of Scripture—sometimes to the point of becoming rather fanciful.

Chrysostom combated any interpretation of Scripture that didn't take the literal meaning of the text seriously. Once, in attacking Gnosticism, a heresy that minimized the importance of the physical creation, he wrote, "Nowhere in Scripture do we find any mention of an earth which is merely figurative."

His sermon on the healing of the paralytic is a good example of John's biblical exposition.

Exhilarating Style

John delivered his sermons with all the oratorical skills he had learned from the great Libanius. Sometime before he was ordained, John wrote a book, *On the Priesthood*, in which he

devoted two chapters to the art of preaching. In those, he reminds would-be preachers of "the great toil which is expended upon sermons delivered publicly to the congregation." Hearers may give them scant credit, "assuming the role of spectators sitting in judgment." The people, he wrote, often come not to be instructed but to be entertained. "Most people usually listen to a preacher for pleasure, not profit, as though it were a play or a concert."

Indeed, despite John's clear love for the people, his expectations were low: "It generally happens that the greater part of the church consists of ignorant people.… Scarcely one or two present have acquired real discrimination."

Thus, the preacher must rid himself of the desire for praise yet strive for an eloquence that will gain people's attention. Eloquence is not given by birth, but the preacher must "cultivate its force by constant application and exercise." Chrysostom seemed to have mastered it: even though some of his sermons lasted two hours, people still called for more.

Prophetic Toughness

Chrysostom preached often against worldliness and the neglect of the poor—preaching that today we call prophetic. For example, in the 90 sermons on the Gospel of Matthew, Chrysostom referred 40 times to almsgiving, 13 times to poverty, more than 30 times to avarice, and almost 20 times to wrongly acquired and wrongly used wealth.

In one sermon he asks the rich, "You say you have not sinned yourselves. But are you sure you are not benefiting from the previous crimes and thefts of others?"

Later he says, "When your body is laid in the ground, the memory of your ambition will not be buried with you; for each passerby as he looks at your great house will say, 'What tears went into the building of that house! How many orphans were left naked by it, how many widows wronged, how many workmen cheated out of their wages?' Your accusers will pursue you even after you are dead."

On another occasion he warned, "I am going to say something terrible, but I must say it: Treat God as you would your slaves. You give them freedom in your will: then free Christ from hunger, want, prison, nakedness!"

Pastoral Tenderness

Because of John's emphasis on the duty of Christians, some criticized him for being moralistic, even Pelagian (believing that good works lead to salvation).

In fact, Chrysostom preached 32 sermons on Romans that were later used by Augustine to demonstrate that Chrysostom could not be so accused: "What is it that has saved you?" John preached. "Your hope in God alone, and your having faith in him in regard to what he promised and gave. Beyond this there is nothing that you have contributed."

In addition, though he was harsh with his people, he always preached with hope. "Have you sinned?" he added to one sermon on repentance. "Go into the church and wipe out your sin. As often as you fall down in the marketplace, you pick yourself up again. So too, as often as you sin, repent of your sin. Do not despair. Even if you sin a second time, repent a second time. Do not by indifference lose hope entirely of the good things prepared.

"Even if you are in extreme old age and have sinned, go in, repent! For here there is a physician's office, not a courtroom. [The church] is not a place where punishment of sin is exacted, but where the forgiveness of sin is granted. Tell your sin to God alone: 'Before you alone have I sinned, and I have done what is evil in your sight.' And your sin will be forgiven you."

Sometimes after scolding his hearers, he showed them his pastoral intent:

"My reproach of you today is severe, but I beg you to pardon it. It is just that my soul is wounded. I do not speak in this way out of enmity but out of care for you. Therefore I will now strike a gentler tone.… I know that your intentions are good and that you realize your mistakes. The realization of the greatness of one's sin is the first step on the way to virtue.… You must offer assurance that you will not fall into the same sins again."

Without Equal

Chrysostom has had his critics, ancient and modern. Socrates, a fifth-century historian, faulted him for "too great a latitude of speech," and modern historian W. H. C. Frend says, "He was tactless toward colleagues."

His courage and candor earned him a reputation as a great preacher and faithful Christian. But in his day, his only reward was exile and death. In his final sermon, he seems to have seen what was coming, and he faced it with characteristic courage and style:

"The waters are raging, and the winds are blowing, but I have no fear for I stand firmly upon a rock. What am I to fear? Is it death? Life to me means Christ, and death is gain. Is it exile? The earth and everything it holds belongs to the Lord. Is it loss of property? I brought nothing into this world, and I will bring nothing out of it. I have only contempt for the world and its ways, and I scorn its honors."

Despite his scorn of honors, such passages cause us to honor him 1,600 years later—as one without equal among the preachers of antiquity.

Cured by the Masters of Angels

A Sermon on the healing of the paralytic

"In the porticoes was one man who had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been sick for a long time, he said to him: 'Do you wish to get well?' The sick man answered him and said, 'Yes, Lord. But I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred; while I am coming, another steps down before me' " [John 5:5–7].

Why did Jesus pass by all the others and come to this man? He did it so that he might show his power and his loving kindness.

A Long Misery

Let us not lightly pass over either the place or the 38 years the man had been in the grip of his infirmity. Let all men listen carefully—all those who have grown old in unending poverty, all who live with the weakness of their infirmity, all who endure the crises of worldly affairs, all who have lived with the surging storms of unexpected troubles. This paralytic lies before us as a haven open to all, as a safe port from human disasters.

No one is so foolish, no one is so miserable and distressed that, if he looks at this man he would not generously and willingly endure whatever troubles may befall himself. If he were sick for twenty years or ten or only five, would not these years have been enough to destroy his strength of soul? Yet this man did not leave the pool but stayed there for 38 years and proved his great patience.

Perhaps you think the length of time he stayed there is a marvelous thing. But if you listen to what he said, then especially will you come to know the virtue and discipline of his whole way of life.

Great Patience, Great Glory

Christ stood there and asked him, “Do you wish to get well?” and who would not have known that he wished to get well? Why, then, did Christ ask him?

Christ knew what the man was going to say, but he still asked him if he wished to be cured. Christ did not ask him because he did not know the answer, but he did it so as to give the paralytic an opportunity to tell of his personal disaster in tragic terms and so to teach us a lesson in patience.

What, then, did the paralytic say? He did not take the question in bad grace, he did not become angry, he did not say in reply, “You see that I am paralyzed, and you know how long I have been sick. Do you still ask me if I wish to get well? Did you come to make fun of my misfortune and to ridicule another’s troubles?”

And you can be sure that sick men are sullen and surly even if they have been confined to bed for only a year. But when your illness has been your constant companion for 38 years, how likely could it be that your virtuous way of life and your self-discipline would not have been spent and used up in so long a span of time?

Nonetheless, the paralytic neither said nor thought any such thing. With great reasonableness, he made his reply and said, “Yes, Lord, but I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred.” See how many troubles gathered together to besiege him—he was sick; he was poor; he had no one to stand by his side.

“While I am coming, another steps down before me”—this disappointment is more pitiful than all the others. By itself, it is enough to bend and move a heart of stone. I can imagine seeing the man, each single year, crawling along and coming to the mouth of the pool. I can imagine him, each single year, hanging at the very brink of having his hope come to a happy fulfillment.

And what is worse, he endured this not for two or three or ten years but for 38 years. He showed every effort but failed to reach the reward. The race was run, but the prize went to another over these many years.

And still more difficult was the fact that he saw others freed from their disease. For you certainly know that we get a keener perception of our own troubles when we see that others have fallen into the same dreadful ills but then are freed from them. This is why a poor man feels his own poverty all the more when he sees another man who is rich. The sick man feels more pain when he sees that many of those who were afflicted have rid themselves of their ailments, while he has no hope of such a happy end.

This is what happened to the paralytic. It is true that he was struggling against sickness, poverty, and loneliness for so long a time. It is true that he saw others freed from their ills while he was always trying but never had the strength to succeed. It is true that he had no expectation for the future of again being rid of his suffering. Nonetheless, he did not leave the pool and go away. Each year he hurried to the waters as fast as his ailment allowed.

As for ourselves, after we pray once to God for some favor or other and fail to get it, we become troubled and fall into the utmost indifference and deepest grief. We withdraw from prayer and put an end to all earnest effort.

Can we praise the paralytic as he deserves? Can we condemn ourselves enough for our negligence? What defense or pardon would we deserve when we slacken our efforts and lose heart so quickly, whereas he stood steadfast and patient for 38 years?

What, then, did Christ do? When the paralytic showed that he deserved to be cured, in all justice Christ came to him before the others and said to him, “Rise, pick up your mattress, and walk!” [verse 8].

Do you see how the 38 years did him no harm because he had endured everything with patience? His soul had become more virtuous and disciplined in that long span of time. It had

been tested by his misfortune as in a smelting furnace, and therefore he received his cure with greater glory. For it was not an angel but the master of the angels himself who cured him.

Strong, Wise Love

Why did Christ command him to take up his mattress?

Unless his limbs had been made solid and his joints held fast, he would not have been able to support the weight on his shoulders. In addition to all this, he also showed that, when Christ gave the command, everything happened in a single moment—he was both free from his disease and returned to health.

Even if physicians free their patients from diseases, they cannot bring a sick man back to health in a single moment. They still need another long period of time for the patient to recuperate, so that traces of the disease may, little by little, be driven out and cast forth from the body. But Christ does not cure in this way. In a single moment of time, he both frees from disease and restores to health; there is no interval between the cure and the recovery.

When a maidservant is rebelling but then sees her master coming, she grows humble and returns to her good behavior. So, too, the paralytic's body had revolted like the maidservant, and this caused the paralysis. But when the body saw its master coming near, it returned to its good behavior and resumed its proper discipline. And the word of Christ accomplished all this.

"Afterward Jesus found him and said to him, 'See, you are cured. Sin no more, so that nothing worse may happen to you' " [verse 14].

Did you see the physician's wisdom? Did you see his concern? Not only did he free the man from his ailment at the time he was cured, but he also made him safe against disease for the future. And this was a very opportune time to do so.

When the man was lying on his couch, Jesus said nothing like this to him; he did not then remind him of his sins. For the souls of those who are sick are distressed and somewhat morose. So first he drove out the disease, first he restored the man to health. Then, after he proved by his deed his power and his concern for him, he gave his timely exhortation and advice. Why? Because Christ had already shown by the very things he did that he now deserved to be believed.

The Master

Pay careful attention to me here because here is the crux of the whole struggle: "This is why they kept persecuting him, because he did these things on the Sabbath" [verse 18].

Let us see, therefore, how Christ defends himself. For the way he presents his case shows us whether he is a free man or a servant, whether he is one who serves or one who commands.

There was a time when a man who had gathered wood on the Sabbath was stoned to death because he had carried burdens on the Sabbath. Christ was accused of this serious sin because he had violated the Sabbath.

Does he first ask for pardon as would a servant and a man subject to orders? Or does he show himself as a man with power and authority, like a master who presides over the law and who has himself given the commands? How, then, does he make his defense?

He said, "My Father works even until now, and I work" [verse 17]. Did you see his authority?

If he were inferior to and less than the Father, what he said is no defense. Rather, it is a greater charge and a more grievous accusation.

Only a king or the emperor is permitted to wear a purple robe and a crown on his head. Suppose, then, some man from the crowd is seen wearing this adornment and is then dragged into the courtroom. Suppose he says, "I am wearing this adornment because this is what the emperor wears." This kind of defense does not free him from the charge but even makes him subject to more serious punishment and vengeance.

Therefore, no one who is an inferior and a subject will ever defend himself with such arguments. But if a man is himself an emperor, or one who has the same dignity, he will feel quite confident in saying that he is only doing what the emperor does. Just as their preeminence is one and the same, so too their power would naturally be one and the same.

Therefore, if we see someone offering this argument in his own defense, he must in every way be a person of the same dignity as the one whose power he puts forward in his own defense. Therefore, when Christ used this argument to justify to the Jews what he had done, he gave us an indisputable proof that he is of the same dignity as the Father.

As soon as the sacred word was uttered by his holy tongue, the sickness fled, the word became deed, and the whole illness was completely cured.

Letters from a Lonely Exile

Three brutal years under armed guard reveal the true character of John Chrysostom.

On June 20, 404, Archbishop John Chrysostom left Constantinople under military escort, never to return.

He was exiled to the backwater town of Cucusus, in the mountains of Armenia. Separation from friends and raids from Isaurians (tribes from mountainous southern Turkey) continually plagued his last years—as did the climate and his poor health: "During the last two months I have been no better than one dead … In spite of endless contrivances, I could not shake off the pernicious effects of the cold … I underwent extreme sufferings, perpetual vomiting … loss of appetite, and constant sleeplessness."

Three years of these severe hardships would end with death, yet Chrysostom remained faithful to Christ. He also remained a source of encouragement to friends and followers. To paraphrase Chrysostom himself, the gold of his life undergirded the currency of his words.

What spiritual principles supported him during these last, brutal years in exile? Some answers can be gleaned from correspondence with his friend Olympias, a deaconess of the church in Constantinople who was exiled for her friendship with John. John also wrote and sent to Olympias a short book on the subject of God's providence. This book and these letters show us how spiritual theory and practice intersected in Chrysostom's life.

Strength from Disciplines

One scholar has noted that we learn much from the simple formula at the beginning of his letters: "To my Lady, the most reverend and divinely favored deaconess Olympias, I John, bishop, send greeting in the Lord." Even in exile, with their ecclesiastical connection formally broken, they continued to exchange greetings using their ranks within the church.

Within the church, they had celebrated the Eucharist, prayed and fasted, heard the Scripture preached and applied, and given alms. This disciplined and celebrative life prepared them for the present testing, for they were part of something larger than themselves:

"Amid alternate trials, and respites from trial, the fabric of the Church was wrought … If then even now you will reckon up the good things with the painful, you will see that many events have occurred which … are unspeakable proofs of the great providence and succor of God."

Dejection and Sickness

In her exile, Olympias soon became despondent over her drastic change in circumstances. She also wondered why God would allow the faithful to suffer.

Chrysostom first reminds her of the close connection between emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being: “For dejection causes sickness; when the body is exhausted and enfeebled, and remains in a neglected condition, deprived of the assistance of physicians, and of a wholesome climate, and an abundant supply of the necessaries of life, consider how great an aggravation of distress is occasioned thereby.”

So he beseeches Olympias, who suffers from some malady, “to pay great attention to the restoration of your bodily health.” He relates some practical measures he has taken: “For a few days ago when I suffered from a tendency to vomiting, owing to the state of the atmosphere, I had recourse to the drug which was sent me … and I found that no more than three days’ application of it cured my infirmity.” John even rebukes her gently: “If you also would take the requisite care of yourself, you would be in a far more satisfactory condition.”

Think Like a Christian!

Chrysostom also reminds Olympias of the spiritual principles he had consistently preached in Antioch and Constantinople.

“The present life,” he says in one forceful passage, “is a wrestling school, a gymnasium, a battle, a smelting furnace, and a dyer’s house of virtue. Therefore, just as tanners grasp the hides and first work them vigorously, stretching, striking, and dashing them against walls and rocks, and by countless other treatments render them fit for the reception of the dye—in this way they bring out the prized color; just as goldsmiths throw the gold into the fire to purify it, delivering it over to the testing of the furnace; just as coaches train the athletes in the wrestling schools with much hard work, attacking them more viciously than their opponents, so that every part of their bodies might be adequately prepared by exercise for the grasps of their enemies and for an easy escape; so in the same way God acts in the present life … Desiring to create steadfast and patiently enduring people, God allows the coin to be tried by every means.”

Thus, he exhorts his friend: “Nothing, Olympias, redounds so much to the credit of anyone as patient endurance in suffering. For this is indeed the queen of virtues, and the perfection of crowns; and as it excels all other forms of righteousness.”

At the same time, Chrysostom skillfully weaves in the theme of the Christian’s final hope: “For in proportion as the strain of the affliction is increased are the garlands of victory multiplied; in proportion as the gold is heated does it become purified; the longer the merchant makes his voyage on the sea, the larger is the freight he collects.”

Elsewhere he adds, “For the circumstances and events of the present life have the character of a journey, but the realities of the future await us in our true homeland.”

Responding to Olympias’s concern about why the righteous suffer, Chrysostom reminds her about John the Baptist:

“Do not say: ‘Why was John allowed to die?’ for what occurred was not a death, but a crown; not an end, but the beginning of a greater life. Learn to think and live like a Christian, and you will not only not be harmed by any of these events, but will reap the greatest benefits.”

The Greatest Harm

Paul himself fervently requested that God deliver him from his “thorn in the flesh,” a thorn Chrysostom interprets as “the blow, the bonds, the chains, the imprisonments, the being dragged about, and maltreated, and tortured by the scourges of public executioners.” When Paul realized that his petition was not to be granted, “having learned the benefit of the trial, he held his peace, and rejoiced at the things that happened to him.”

Paul had peace in the midst of physical suffering because he knew that genuine harm had another source. “I at least have not ceased, and will not cease saying,” wrote Chrysostom, “that sin is the only thing which is really distressing.”

“In what way were the apostles harmed, some of whom were beheaded and others handed over to even worst punishment? In what way were the martyrs harmed, whose souls were broken by the most severe tortures? Didn’t they all shine brightly at the very moment they were being abused, at the time others set traps for them, when they nobly stood firm while suffering the worst agonies?”

One might have expected that exile would have disillusioned Chrysostom since his suffering was in many ways a direct result of his faithfulness. One can imagine him on a frigid winter’s night in Cucusus, asking himself if this indeed was how God should treat those who diligently sought his will and attempted to live it out.

Instead, he looks not at his suffering but at the example of previous Christian heroes like Paul. Perhaps during bouts of nausea, while shut up in a smoky room, wrapped in blankets to ward off the cold, Chrysostom pondered the examples of Job and Abraham, Joseph and John the Baptist. In one passage, Chrysostom tells Olympias, “May the endurance of these spiritual athletes become a teacher of patient endurance for you. Seeing that the entire life of these noble and lofty men is woven through with these kinds of sufferings, don’t be disturbed or alarmed—neither by your own particular trials, nor those trials common to all. For the Church has been nourished from the very beginning in this fashion, and in this way has grown.”

This is one reason he continues to revel in the love of God. I have been unable to find a single instance in Chrysostom’s correspondence or discourses from his last months where he questions the goodness and love of God for him. Instead, he concludes that God “does not simply watch over us, but also loves us; he ardently loves us with an inexplicable love, with an impassable yet fervent, vigorous, genuine, indissoluble love, a love that is impossible to extinguish.”

And thus he encourages Olympias, “If you experience deliverance from your sufferings in this present life, glorify God. If your life ends in severe difficulties, even then offer thanks.”

Mystery Is the Answer

Finally, even in the midst of adversity, Chrysostom is keenly aware of the mystery and providence of God: “He granted existence itself to us out of his goodness and has no need of our service. It is fit to regard him with wonder and worship him, not only because he created us, nor because he gave us a spiritual and rational soul, nor because he made us better than all other creatures, nor because he entrusted to us the dominion over all visible things … but rather because he has no need of us.…

“Indeed, before we or angels or the powers above were created, he was already existing, possessing his own glory and blessedness. It is only through love that he created us. He did all these things for our sake and many more other things in addition.”

He concludes, “For the providence of God is beyond understanding, his care is incomprehensible, his goodness is indescribable, and his love for humanity is unsearchable.”

The advice and model Chrysostom presents, then, is two-sided: Do what you can to avoid suffering; if it cannot be avoided, if your prayers do not bring your deliverance, know that God will remove any lasting harm from what you are enduring.

Chrysostom offers Olympias a spirituality for the long haul, a manner of thinking and living that is broad enough to encompass all of life’s struggles and tragedies: “Therefore, my friend, wait for the final outcome. For all things will certainly turn out, whether in this life or the life to come. In every circumstance, yield to the incomprehensibility of God’s providence.”

Culture Wars

How Chrysostom battled heresy, superstition, and paganism.

"As long as a city is encircled with walls all around," wrote John Chrysostom, "it mocks its besiegers and remains in perfect safety. But once a breach is made in the wall, no larger than a gate, the circuit is no more use to it, though all the rest stands safe."

It is the same, he says, in the church: "As long as the nimble wits and the wisdom of the shepherd encompass it like a wall all around, all the enemy's devices end in his own shame and ridicule, and the inhabitants remain unharmed; but when someone manages to break down a part of this defense, even though he fails to destroy it all, from that moment practically the whole city is ruined through that one part."

As a "shepherd," Chrysostom tried to defend the faithful with faithful preaching. He was especially concerned about three questions that troubled the church at the end of the fourth century.

Is Jesus God?

Chrysostom began preaching just after Arianism, a teaching that denied the full deity of Christ, had been officially condemned (by the Second Ecumenical Council in 381 and by Emperor Theodosius). After fifty years of ascendancy, the political power of Arianism was gone, but it remained influential at Antioch and Constantinople.

Chrysostom argued that such heresy is produced by following human reasoning rather than the true sense of Scripture. It may arise from not reading the Bible, or from something more sinister: "The desire to rule," he once said, "is the mother of heresies."

In his attacks on Arianism, Chrysostom cared as much about the Arians' moral defects—their vanity and self-seeking—as about their misunderstanding: "They are like some labyrinth or puzzles which have no end … and have their very origin in vanity.… Ignorant of heavenly things, they involve themselves in the dust cloud of countless reasonings."

Chrysostom defended the right use of reason. But he believed Greek culture, which reveled in rationality, produced speculation about Christian realities that led to doctrinal errors such as Arianism:

"For nothing causes such dizziness as human reasoning, all whose words are of earth and which cannot endure to be enlightened from above. Earthly reasonings are full of mud, and therefore we need streams from heaven, that when the mud has settled, the clearer portion may rise and mingle with the heavenly lessons."

Chrysostom, by the way, distinguished between *heretics*, who misunderstand doctrine, and *false prophets*, who are morally corrupt and can do no good: "Do not make an issue of the various heretics of different hue and color. They all proclaim Christ even if they lack something in orthodoxy. They all reverence the One who was crucified under Pontius Pilate in Palestine."

To refute the Arian arguments, Chrysostom interpreted biblical passages to show the equality of the Son with the Father. The Scriptures that seem to support the Arian position (those that show Jesus as human), he attributed to "the condescension of the Incarnation," that is, the accommodation of Christ to his human nature.

The very fact of the Incarnation, argued Chrysostom, proves both the humanity and divinity of Christ: if he were not God, he would not have humbled himself but would have clung to his higher status!

Do Jews Bring Luck?

In Chrysostom's time, Judaism was the creed of an existing nation, venerable for its antiquity even when exiled from its homeland. A significant Jewish community existed in Antioch, and the holiness of the synagogue in which the one God was worshiped and where the sacred books were preserved made a deep impression on Christians.

But their attraction to Judaism was superstitious more than religious. For example, some Christian women wore Jewish amulets, and many Christians took oaths (for legal purposes) in the synagogue and sought out Jewish physicians for medical cures.

In a series of sermons delivered at Antioch in 386 and 387, Chrysostom attempted to diminish the prestige of Judaism in the eyes of Christians. He argued that Christians should not practice the ceremonies of Judaism, for the Old Testament points beyond itself to a higher form of religion through a system of types and foreshadowings. Furthermore, the Old Testament dispensation, though totally appropriate for its period, became inadequate and untenable when the new epoch dawned—just as the light of the moon becomes superfluous when the sun rises.

The general principle is this: an action commanded by God must be performed at the right time; at the wrong time, it can be harmful or foolish. To Chrysostom, the institutions of Judaism were no longer timely and thus no longer pleased God.

Chrysostom's sermons by today's standards sound vehement and anti-Semitic. Some scholars suggest they led to later confrontations between Jews and Christians. But in contexts other than Christian Judaizing, Chrysostom spoke approvingly of the Jews. As bishop of Constantinople, for example, he praised them for scrupulously obeying their law, unlike lazy Christians who were unwilling to expend any effort on practicing their religion. He also commented on the respect in which the rabbi was held by his congregation, in contrast to his own treatment, as patriarch, by fellow Christians.

Is Paganism True?

Despite the toleration and gradual rise of Christianity in the fourth century, many pagans refused to convert. There were diehards and apostates, like Emperor Julian (a.d. 361–363), who anticipated the collapse of Christianity and the re-establishment of paganism: "The foolishness of the Galileans (i.e., Christians) has all but destroyed society," he once wrote, "were it not for the favor of the gods, which preserves us all."

Many pagans were also skeptical of Christianity when they saw the prevalence of nominal Christianity among the masses, worldliness among upper-class Christians, and inordinate ambition among the clergy. This Chrysostom recognized: "They see our lives open to reproach, our souls worldly. We admire wealth equally with them, and even more. We have the same horror of death, the same dread of poverty, the same impatience of disease; we are equally fond of glory and of rule.… How then can they believe?"

Chrysostom countered pagan criticism of Christianity with his own criticism of Greek culture and religion. He had studied with pagan teachers, learning the Greek classics of poetry and philosophy, but he had found them lacking.

He attacked popular polytheistic paganism. A local pagan prophetess, he said, prophesied through the inspiration of evil spirits, and Apollo himself was a demon. He contrasted the Olympic games (dedicated to the Devil), with Christ's contest, in which the rules are totally different: the person smitten rather than the person smiting is crowned!

He also questioned the very basis of pagan culture. Pagan culture, he said, was based upon vanity and materialism, the ideal of beauty as opposed to the ideal of service. Pagans preferred eloquence to virtue and truth.

Making use of the apostle Peter as a symbol of the church, he once said, "Where now is Greece, with her big pretensions? Where the name of Athens? Where the ravings of the philosophers? He of Galilee, he of Bethsaida, he the uncouth rustic has overcome them all."

The success of a humble, rustic Christianity was to Chrysostom a key proof of its truth: "I once heard a Christian disputing in a ridiculous manner with a Greek, and both parties in their mutual fray ruining themselves.… The dispute being about Paul and Plato, the Greek endeavored to show that Paul was unlearned and ignorant, but the Christian, from simplicity, was anxious to prove that Paul was more eloquent than Plato."

With this line of reasoning, Chrysostom said, victory would go to the Greek even if the Christian won the debate: "For if Paul was a more considerable person than Plato, many probably would object that it was not by grace but by excellency of speech that he prevailed."

Instead, Chrysostom argued, "If Paul was uneducated and yet overcame Plato, the victory … was brilliant." The triumph of the gospel could only be seen as a grace of God, not a human or political triumph.

Bringing the Dead to Life

Chrysostom believed that arguments alone could not overcome the dangerous heresies of his day. Christian deeds were essential.

"Let us show forth then a new kind of life. Let us make earth, heaven; let us hereby show the Greeks of how great blessings they are deprived. For when they behold in us good conversation, they will look upon the very face of the kingdom of Heaven.… Thus they too will be reformed.… For not even a dead man raised so powerfully attracts the Greek as a person practicing self-denial."

John preached against, argued over, and even mocked superstition, paganism, and heresy, but he did so with pastoral compassion: "Our song leads us in the battle against the heretics, not to throw to the ground that which is standing upright, but to raise that which is lying prostrate. That is our kind of battle. It does not kill the living, but brings the dead to life."

More Than a Great Preacher

For 215 million Christians, Chrysostom is a household name. Why?

John Chrysostom is remembered by Western Christians (if he is remembered) mostly as a great preacher. But to 215 million Orthodox believers, John is much more. To discover why, Christian History talked to Bishop Kallistos Ware, lecturer in Eastern Orthodox studies at the University of Oxford. Bishop Ware is author of two popular introductions: The Orthodox Church (Penguin, 1963), and The Orthodox Way (Mowbray, 1979).

Christian History:

Why is John Chrysostom so well remembered by Eastern Orthodox Christians today?

Kallistos Ware:

He is familiar to every Orthodox believer because we hear his name each Sunday in worship. The liturgy celebrated nearly every week is attributed to St. John Chrysostom. At the end of the service, in the final blessing, we hear the words, "… the prayers of our holy father, John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, whose liturgy we have celebrated."

In addition, we see him in church: his icon, along with others, is displayed at the front of the church. He is pictured in bishop's vestments, standing with head bowed, holding a scroll of the divine liturgy associated with his name.

Did John actually write this service?

The service has been evolving from before John, but the nucleus of it likely goes back to Chrysostom's time. The service at Antioch that John used contained at least some of the elements we use today.

What is unique about John's understanding of worship?

John bequeathed a very strong sense of the unity between the worship of the earthly congregation and the worship that goes on unceasingly in heaven. "When the priest invokes the Holy Spirit," he once said, "angels attend him, and the whole sanctuary is thronged with heavenly power." Put simply, John thought of worship as "heaven on earth."

When we celebrate the Eucharist, John explained, we are taken up into an action much greater than ourselves: "When you see the Lord's sacrifice lying before you … and all who partake marked with the precious blood, can you imagine that you are still among humans and still standing on earth? Are you not at once transported to heaven? Do you not gaze around upon heavenly things?"

We're surprised that you didn't mention preaching as the first thing you appreciate about John.

His preaching is, naturally, central, yet the sermon for John was part of the liturgy. Chrysostom was a liturgical preacher. His sermons were normally delivered during the divine liturgy.

What to you is most impressive about John's preaching?

His deep love for holy Scripture. He can be truly called an evangelical. He likes to keep close to the literal sense of the Scripture.

Another thing is John's emphasis on love for others. In one sense, we cannot be saved without others: our sanctification is found in them and theirs in us as we love and serve one another. That's the main way we "work out our salvation" (Phil. 2:12).

Is this why John was so concerned about the poor?

Partly, but this also is connected with his view of worship. Worship as heaven on earth goes hand in hand with a strong social conscience. "You honor the altar at church, because the body of Christ rests upon it," he once said, "but those who are themselves the very body of Christ you treat with contempt and you remain indifferent when you see them perishing." Upon this living altar—which can be seen lying in the streets and the marketplaces, he said—one can also offer a sacrifice to God.

The body of Christ received in the sacrament is vital, but there's also the living body of Christ, which to Chrysostom means all human beings. Not that everyone is saved and a member of the church. But every human being, made in the image of God, reflects the image of Christ. Christ himself, in fact, identified himself specifically with the poor and needy (Matt. 25).

Every evening in London's center, you can see homeless people sleeping in the streets, in cardboard boxes or under ragged blankets. That would have appalled Chrysostom. He would say there is something wrong with a society in which some people have grown rich while the poor lie homeless in the streets.

"The Unknowability of God" is one of John's most famous treatises. Why was that seemingly abstract theme so important to John?

John felt deeply that God is a mystery beyond our understanding. We cannot understand God in the way he understands himself. If we did, we would be God!

John believed in God's nearness—that God reveals himself, that we share in his grace and glory. But God always remains the One who is beyond and above all that we know. He is closer

to us than is our own heart, and yet he is beyond and above everything. This has been a strong emphasis of Eastern Orthodoxy through the centuries.

What difference has that emphasis made?

It means, first of all, that we haven't set too high a value on human reason. Human reason is a gift from God, and we must use our reasoning powers to the full. But we cannot comprehend God through the use of syllogisms, analogies, or comparisons. Though we have a long tradition of theological reflection, we've never tried to make God fit our reasoning powers.

Above reason lies a higher faculty of spiritual understanding—the *nous*: our power to apprehend spiritual truth directly, immediately, intuitively, not just through reason but through inner vision.

This goes hand in hand with an emphasis on silence. St. Basil says, "Let things ineffable be honored with silence." We mustn't imagine that everything can be expressed in words. To learn to be silent is extremely difficult, but even in our most eloquent speeches, there has to be woven into them the dimension of silence. I think that happens in Chrysostom. He was a preacher of outstanding eloquence, but he never imagined that all truth could be put into words.

The mystery of God means a willingness to wait on God in inner stillness, not to verbalize everything. It's an attitude of listening, of attending to Another. That's surely very relevant for us today. We've driven silence out of our lives, and we need to recover it. I believe we are deeply sick as a society and as individuals because of our lack of silence.

Most Western Christians are unaware of John's exile and death. Why are they important to you?

John had the courage of his convictions; he did not compromise the demands of the gospel to please those with wealth and power. As a result, he suffered, but he bore his sufferings with joy.

However, we do not limit his sufferings to his exile and death. In his youth, Chrysostom was a monk, and he lived a severely ascetic life. He practiced the ascetic life at home until he was able to go into the desert for a short time. In fact, he followed the ascetic life with such severity that he permanently damaged his health, which he later regretted.

In his early monastic training, he was a martyr inwardly—he died daily to the flesh through his ascetic practices. This helped prepare him for the time when he had to suffer outwardly as a martyr.

His end in 407 was hastened by the harsh treatment he received and the travel demands made on him. However, his last words are so well remembered, they've become a cliche: "Glory be to God forever" (some translate it, "Glory to God in all things"). But he said them with entire sincerity.

What most inspires you about John?

That he combines the role of liturgist and social reformer. John was deeply concerned with the worship of God, that worship should be done with beauty—but not at the expense of his social conscience.

In John, a concern for the church as heaven on earth goes hand in hand with the concern for serving the poor in specific and practical ways. His social action is a continuation of the liturgy.

Adoring the Ineffable

Prayers from the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom

Before the scripture is read, a copy of the gospels is carried to the congregation and back to the altar (symbolizing the entrance of the Logos, Christ, into the world), and the priest prays:

O Lord and Master, our God, who in heaven has established the orders and armies of angels and archangels to minister to your majesty, grant that the holy angels may make the entrance with us and with us serve and glorify your goodness. For to you belongs all glory, honor, and worship, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and always and for ever and ever. Amen.

As the liturgy moves to Holy Communion, the priest prays:

It is fitting and right to sing of you, to praise you, to thank you, to adore you in all places of your dominion. For you are the ineffable God, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, existing forever and yet ever the same, you and your only-begotten Son and your Holy Spirit. You brought us into being out of nothingness, and when we had fallen, you raised us up again. You have not ceased doing everything to lead us to heaven and to bestow upon us your future kingdom. For all this do we thank you and your only-begotten Son and your Holy Spirit—for all the benefits of which we know and those of which we are ignorant, for those that are manifest to us and those that lie concealed.

We thank you also for this sacrifice, which you are pleased to receive from our hands, even though there stand before you thousands of archangels and myriads of angels, Cherubim and Seraphim, six-winged and many-eyed, borne aloft on their wings who sing, proclaim, cry out, and chant the triumphal hymn:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Hosts! Heaven and earth are filled with your glory. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!

Recommended Resources—John Chrysostom

Biographies

Donald Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom* (Harvill, 1939). A brief, reliable account.

F. Chrysostomos Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time,* 2 vol. (1960). The most complete biography of John.

Palladius, *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom,* translated by Robert T. Meyer (1985). Written shortly after Chrysostom's death.

Robert Payne, *The Holy Fire* (St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1980). This book on the Eastern Fathers contains an excellent chapter on Chrysostom's life and thought.

Related Works

Robert A. Krupp, *Shepherding the Flock of God: The Pastoral Theology of John Chrysostom* (Peter Lang, 1991). Discusses Chrysostom's views on family, sexual questions, and other pastoral issues.

J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Antioch: City and Imperial Administration in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1972). Studies the social and political life of Antioch during Chrysostom's day.

Margaret Schatkin, *John Chrysostom as Apologist* (Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies, 1987). A look at John's defense of orthodoxy.

Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century,* (1983). Analyzes John's homilies on "judaizing" Christians.

John's Writings and Sermons

The standard nineteenth-century translation of many of John's works is *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church,* volumes 9–14 (Eerdmans, 1983). Another set that offers some recent translations is the *Fathers of the Church Series* published by Catholic University of America Press.

Other English translations include:

In Praise of Saint Paul, translated by Thomas Halton (Daughters of St. Paul, 1963). Seven sermons on the apostle.

Six Books on the Priesthood, translated by Graham Neville (St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1977). John's views on the responsibilities and temptations of the clergy.

On Marriage and Family Life, translated by Katharine P. Roth and David Anderson (St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1986). Based on passages such as 1 Cor. 7, Eph. 5:22–23, and Col. 4:18.

On Wealth and Poverty, translated by Katherine Roth (St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1984). Sermons on the rich man and Lazarus.
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[1]*Christian History Magazine-Issue 44: John Chrysostom: Legendary Early Church Preacher*. 1994. Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today.