

23. THE FAITHFUL BISHOP OF CONSTANTINOPLE

There is unrest in the streets of the large city of Antioch. Lots of people are roaming around. Listen carefully! We can hear threatening shouts and see clenched fists! Thousands of people come marching past the statue of the emperor. People send glares full of hatred at that statue as if that piece of stone had somehow harmed them.

"Pull that thing down!" someone bellows.

The furious crowd roars a loud approval. It doesn't take long for the men to act, and soon the heavy statue of the emperor crashes to the ground. The ruffians cheer. Ranting and raving, the irrational mob keeps walking.

But what is all this about?

THE PEOPLE REPENT

A revolt has broken out in Antioch. The city's people are dissatisfied because they must pay such high taxes. That dissatisfaction had been simmering for a long time, so when the people heard that the emperor had introduced new taxes, their long pent-up hatred and rage exploded.

They would no longer pay those high taxes!

They refused!

Enough is enough!

That's why the angry, frustrated people march through the city in a rage. That's why they vent

their fury on that statue of the emperor. But finally, things settle down in the city because it's getting dark. The rioters have gone home.

However, the people come to their senses in the days that follow this tumultuous day. They begin to think about what they have done.



Theodosius I 347—395 AD
Wikipedia

Sure, it is easy to make a lot of noise. To yell, scream and topple the emperor's statue is not hard!

But what will the consequences be of their unwise and thoughtless actions?

They deeply offended the mighty emperor of the powerful Roman empire. How angry he must be! And that emperor is - Theodosius! They know that their emperor is very hot-tempered. He will not allow an insult directed at him to go unpunished!

Thessalonica has experienced that temper! Not long ago, *they* had revolted too! This revolt resulted in the emperor sending in his troops and allowing them to wreak havoc there! With an uncontrolled rage and no regard for anything, the imperial soldiers had cruelly murdered about 7000 people in only three hours, not knowing or caring if they were guilty or innocent! It had been a massacre.

When the people of Antioch remember that, they shudder, and an overpowering fear arises in their hearts. Will the streets of Antioch also be coloured red with the blood of thousands of people, just like in Thessalonica? The people of Antioch tremble! That's not surprising because they *deserve* punishment. Can't *anybody* help? Can't that impending disaster be averted? The fearful inhabitants direct their trembling hearts on high. Only God can help!

Look, the church doors are open.

The people stream inside.

The preacher stands on the pulpit. It becomes quiet, and the service begins. In his sermon, the preacher admonishes the people severely for their sins. He tells them that they must repent.

It is breathlessly quiet in the large building.

Thousands listen attentively to the preacher's reproving and warning words.

"You poor people," the preacher tells the large gathering: "you fear the vengeance of the earthly judge. But don't you fear and tremble before the wrath and just punishment of the heavenly Judge?"

You tremble at the thought of the emperor's vengeance, but how will you fare if the vengeance of an angry *God* strikes you? Will you survive the just judgement of the righteous Judge of heaven and earth when He summons you before His formidable judgment seat?"

That's how the preacher continues to admonish his sheep for some time. Silently and deeply impressed by what they have heard, the large crowd goes home, but the fear remains in their hearts!

Yet the anxious inhabitants of Antioch will experience that the Lord hears prayer and that He will never put to shame those who flee to Him in true repentance.

The bishop of Antioch travels to Constantinople. At his urgent request, he may see the angry emperor. He asks pardon for the inhabitants of his city.

And?

The emperor obligingly listens to the bishop and grants the requested pardon!

Could he possibly be remembering the inhumane, cruel punishment he meted out in Thessalonica? We do not know.

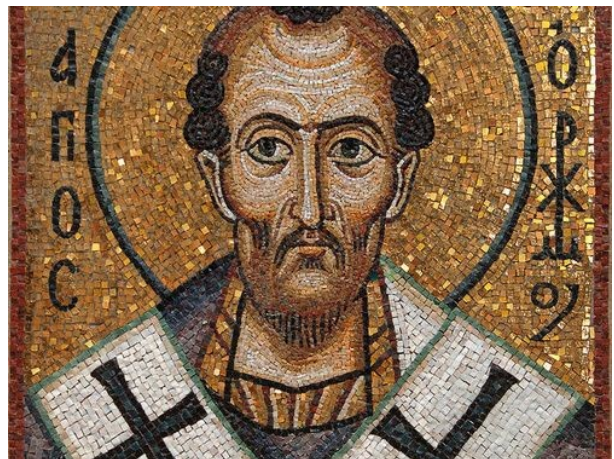
Greatly relieved, the bishop hastens back to Antioch. How glad the people of that city are! The Lord has averted the threatened disaster!

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

Who was that preacher who preached so earnestly and admonishingly from the pulpit that day?

He was not even a bishop or minister but an elder. In those days, the elders could also preach when necessary. Everyone in Antioch knew him.

Everyone in Antioch loved him. His name was John, but they soon called him "Chrysostom" because he could speak so well. Chrysostom means 'golden mouth'.



John Chrysostom 347-407. Wikipedia

John was born in 347 in Antioch. His father died when he was still young, so his pious mother raised him. It soon became evident that God had given John a bright mind. John learned to love and fear the Lord at a young age. He studied at various schools and became a learned man. It did not take long before he became a deacon. Sometime later, he was chosen as presbyter or elder. The people of Antioch loved and respected him, even though he could sternly reprimand them for their sins. They understood that he did it all with uprightness of heart.

John served the church in Antioch for 16 years. Whenever he preached, the church was jam-packed with people. Even Jews and pagans often came to listen to him because his sermons were so earnest and captivating. John's reputation spread far and wide, so much so that when the

bishop of Constantinople died, no one was surprised that they appointed John as bishop of that imperial city. How happy he must have been with such an honour!

But no, he was not pleased with his appointment at all because he did not seek

his own honour. Besides, he loved his sheep at Antioch and did not want to leave them. He felt at home in Antioch. But he was forced to accept the appointment. With a heavy heart, John moved to

'I also always entreat you, and do not cease entreating you, not only to pay attention here to what I say, but also when you are at home, to persevere continually in reading the divine Scriptures'.

John Chrysostom

Constantinople because that's where the emperor and his court lived.

At first, all went well. Empress Eudoxia was a great friend of the new bishop and supported him in all things. She insisted he come to Constantinople because she knew he could preach very well and loved listening to him.

Life was not easy for John Chrysostom in Constantinople.

That imperial city was beautiful but also very wicked. The celebrated ladies of the court lived very sinful lives.

But John lived very soberly and set a godly and pious example. He refused to join the wicked parties - in fact, he openly rebuked the prominent men and women in Constantinople for their sinful lifestyle. Without respect for persons, he announced God's judgement on them if they continued in their sins. John Chrysostom gained many friends in Constantinople. Especially the ordinary people listened breathlessly to his admonishing and reproving preaching. The people loved their bishop!

BANNED!

Anyone who stands up for truth and honesty gets enemies. Chrysostom also gained many enemies because he constantly rebuked them for their sinful lifestyle. His enemies were often the most distinguished in the city. The ladies of the court began to hate him and tried everything to get rid of that annoying bishop. Even Empress Eudoxia became hostile because the stern bishop did not spare her either.

History books tell us she had forcefully taken a field from a poor widow. Chrysostom hears about it. The following Sunday, he preaches about Jezebel, the wicked queen of Israel, who had Naboth stoned to get his vineyard for her husband, Ahab. The empress was also in the

church. When she heard those words, she turned pale.

"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."

John Chrysostom

She noticed that some people glanced at her. That was too much for her proud and arrogant heart. Wild hatred flared up in her heart! She will silence that mouth! John Chrysostom must go!

Other bishops from the city also hated Chrysostom because he did not spare them either when they did wrong. Once, he deposed several bishops because they were not faithful in their work.

And now, the enraged empress seeks support from those dissatisfied bishops, and they are happy to help her. Naturally! They call a council together in a small place close to Constantinople. At that council, those bishops vehemently accuse Chrysostom of various things that were not true but lies and deceit. Although

SOME FACTS ABOUT CHRYSOSTOM

He preached through many books of the Bible, though he had his favourites: "I like all the saints," he said, "but St. Paul the most of all—that vessel of election, the trumpet of heaven."

In his sermons, he denounced abortion, prostitution, gluttony, the theatre, and swearing. About the 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."*

Christianity today.com

John Chrysostom defends himself, they do not listen and depose him. He must leave Constantinople - he was banished.

That was an unjust sentence. The people's emotion is immense when they learn that their beloved bishop must leave Constantinople.

He ascends the pulpit in the overcrowded church for the last time. Amid breathless silence, he informs the congregation that he is blameless and that they are banishing an innocent man. Then he voluntarily permits the imperial soldiers to take him away. But the people assume a threatening attitude. One word from Chrysostom, and they will revolt and defend him. But the banished bishop does not avenge himself for the indignity heaped on him. He admonishes the people to stay calm and quiet.

But after he left Constantinople, the revolt broke out anyway.

There is fierce fighting in the streets. The embittered people force the imperial soldiers out of the church. Some are wounded and killed.



A sculpture of John Chrysostom in Saint Patrick's Cathedral, New York City. Wikipedia

Then something happens that makes the empress afraid. Nobody knows what exactly happened. Some writers tell us that an earthquake caused the imperial palace to tremble on its foundations.

Whatever it was, the empress thinks God's vengeance is pursuing her. She sends several messengers after the departing bishop with the message that he may come back. After much searching, they finally find Chrysostom, who is immediately willing to return. Exuberant with joy, the people go out to meet him. They welcome him with cheers, and soon Chrysostom stands on the pulpit of the large Sophia church again. Peace has returned to Constantinople.



Empress Eudoxia 421-450

EVIL EMPRESS EUDOXIA

It's party time in Constantinople. The streets are full of cheerful people singing and dancing. Banquets are prepared all over the place. The population amuse themselves with all sorts of games. Why? What's going on? Have a look at the large Sophia church. There stands a beautiful statue of Empress Eudoxia. The sun's rays make it glitter and sparkle because that statue is all silver, and its pedestal is constructed of red-brown and purple stone.

The empress is proud of that statue, and when it is finished and unveiled, the empress throws a feast for the people. They must celebrate such a special occasion! Eudoxia wants the whole population to praise and honour her. That's why there is merry feasting.

But Chrysostom is *not* happy with that, and he warns *against* that wicked feasting. This veneration of the empress goes much too far. It dishonours God. The following Sunday, he reprimands both people and the government from the pulpit. That arouses the rage of the distinguished in the city. They think: 'Doesn't that

nuisance want us to have *any* fun? Not even a little feasting? That's just ridiculous!

Hatred against the preacher erupts again. They call another synod, depose Chrysostom for the second time, and banish him. This time permanently! On 20 June 404, he leaves the city for the second time. Cruel, ruthless soldiers carry him away.

That same evening, the sky is coloured red by the flames of a terrible fire. The beautiful Sophia church goes up in flames, and soon nothing is left but a smoking heap of rubble. Perhaps the friends of Chrysostom set fire to the church, but nobody knows for sure. This time, the departing bishop was not called back. Oh no, Eudoxia has sent him to the outer border of the empire.

He spent three years in exile, and during those three years, he suffered terribly. Although he had a weak body, they made him walk for hours through frigid cold and scorching heat. He had to face that chilly climate bareheaded. At times he was in danger of succumbing to weariness. Then

"Preaching improves me. When I begin to speak, weariness disappears; when I begin to teach, fatigue too disappears." Chrysostom

he was beaten and ill-treated by the cruel soldiers and forced to keep going. He had to suffer many hardships. All this was too much for his weak strength. Besides, he was not young anymore; he was sixty years old already.

They had to keep changing his place of banishment

because many of his friends visited him during his exile, and his enemies would not even allow him this comfort.

Especially empress Eudoxia could not bear it that anyone would have anything to do with him. This hatred resulted in the imperial soldiers taking him ever further away. Then Chrysostom had to walk for miles and miles. When he was so exhausted that he couldn't walk anymore, he was pushed on roughly by those cruel soldiers who knew no mercy.

During one of those tiring marches, they came past a small church. Since he was at the end of his strength and painfully stumbled on with great difficulty, he begged the soldiers for a moment's rest in that little church. His torturers denied him this request. He must keep going! Roughly and without pity, they dragged him along. Tottering, he tried to walk further. But a little further, he collapsed, totally exhausted. This compelled the soldiers to return to the little church they had just passed.

He died there on 14 September 407 A. D. His last words were:

"God be praised in all things."

They buried him there. The weary wanderer found rest at last.

So now Eudoxia and her followers in Constantinople can relax. They will no longer hear his earnest admonitions. But everything is recorded in God's book, and on the final day of judgement, they will have to give account of all their wicked deeds before the righteous God.

However, for Chrysostom, all strife and trouble had ended. God took him to Himself in glory. Thirty years after his death, some of his faithful



*John Chrysostom getting exiled by Empress Eudoxia..
Heritage images.*

followers honoured his memory by returning his body to Constantinople.

They buried his remains in the beautiful new cathedral built on the spot of the burned Sophia church. There, his bones rest until the last day. The Lord will give grace and glory to those who walk uprightly before Him, even though the 'honour' comes thirty years after death.

QUESTIONS

1. Explain the cause of the revolt in Antioch. What occurred?
2. How did the bishop admonish the people?
3. How did the bishop serve as a mediator?
4. Briefly describe John Chrysostom's life in Antioch. Why did he go to Constantinople?
5. Explain why his life was difficult in Constantinople.
6. What incident turned Eudoxia against the bishop? What did she resolve to do?
7. According to history, how did God express His displeasure regarding Chrysostom's banishment?
8. Why was he banished the second time?
9. How did he end his days? What happened to his body thirty years later?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read Revelation 7:13-17 and relate these verses to the life of Chrysostom. What Biblical figure also found it necessary to warn a king or queen frequently even though it endangered his life every time?



The rebuilt Sophia Church in Constantinople. <https://www.pallasweb.com/deesis/hagiasophia.html>