

HOMILY 5

ON FASTING AND THE PROPHET JONAH, [THE PROPHET] DANIEL AND THE THREE YOUTHS. DELIVERED ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE HOLY FAST.¹

1

GODAY OUR FESTIVAL is radiant with joy, and the assembly is more brilliant than usual. I wonder, what could be the reason? This achievement belongs to the fast, and I know this; not to the present fast, but to the one that we expect. She² gathered us into the paternal house. Today she returned to the motherly hands of the Church even those who were previously the most indolent. However, if her mere expectation increased our zeal to such a degree, how much piety will she effect in us when she manifests herself and attends to us? So too, when a dreadful commander is about to enter triumphantly into a city, he lays aside all laziness and enters in full haste.

(2) However, do not be frightened when you hear that fasting is a dreadful commander, because she is not terrible to us, but rather, to the nature of the demons. When someone suffers an attack of epilepsy, show him the face of fasting; he freezes up and, because of his fear, remains more motionless than even these very rocks. He appears to be bound by fetters, and truly so, when he sees fasting joined

1. Literally: “τῶν ἀγίων μηστειῶν.” This refers to the fast pertaining to Holy and Great Lent.

2. “She” means the fast that Chrysostom and the eucharistic gathering before him await.

together with her inseparable sister, prayer. And for this reason Christ says: "*This kind is never cast out except by prayer and fasting.*"³ Therefore, since fasting expels the hostile foes of our salvation in this manner and is so terrible to the enemies of our life, we must cherish and embrace her, not dread her. We must be afraid of drunkenness and gluttony, not of fasting. For she⁴ binds our hands behind our backs and surrenders us as slaves and captives to the tyranny of the passions, which resemble a most dangerous mistress. Fasting, however, who finds us slaves and prisoners, loosens the bonds and delivers us from the tyranny; she restores us to our former freedom. Since, however, He combats even our enemies, delivers us from tyranny, and restores us to our former freedom, what other greater proof do you seek of His love toward our race? For it seems that the greatest demonstration of love is for someone to love and hate the same things we do.

2

(3) Do you want to know how much fasting adorns human beings; how much she defends and secures us from danger? I beg of you, think of the blessed and marvelous race of the monastics. In other words, they took flight from the tumult in their midst and they ran quickly toward the peaks of the mountains; they erected their huts in the solitude of the desert as if they pitched them in a sheltered harbor; and they took fasting as a companion and joint communicant throughout their entire lives. This is why she made them angels from men; not only them, but as many as she finds in the cities that submit to her, she elevates to the same height of the wisdom of God. Likewise Moses and Elijah, the pillars of the prophets in the Old Testament—although they were brilliant and great from their other virtues and coura-

3. Mt 17.21.

4. Here, Chrysostom considers drunkenness and gluttony as one, since he uses the singular "she" or "Ἐκείνη" to designate both of them collectively.

geous in approaching God and conversing with Him, as much as is humanly possible—fled for refuge to fasting, and with her power they approached Him. For this reason, God, when in the beginning He created man, He immediately brought him over to and deposited him in the hands of fasting; and he entrusted his salvation to her as if to a loving mother and an excellent teacher. Because the command: "*Of every tree which is in the garden you may freely eat, but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, of it you shall not eat,*"⁵ was one kind of fasting. If fasting was imperative in paradise, much more so was it outside of paradise. If the medicine was useful before the wound, much more so was it after the wound. If the weapon was necessary for us before the rising war of the passions and the tremendous battle with the demons, much more so will the defense of fasting be indispensable. If Adam had heard this voice,⁶ he would not have heard the second one, which said: "*You are earth and to earth you shall return.*"⁷ However, since he disobeyed that voice, death, anxieties, toils, faintheartedness, and a life that is altogether more burdensome than death came upon the human race; this is why thorns and thistles came about; this is the reason for the labors and pains and a life weary with toil.

(4) Do you see how vexed God is when fasting is treated spitefully? Learn how delighted He is when fasting is honored. Just as when she was maltreated He inflicted death as a penalty upon the insolent individual, He revoked death when she was honored once again. Desiring to show you the power of this thing of importance, He gave her authority over the sentence, after the arrest, to snatch the prisoners from the middle of the journey and change their course, toward life. And He did this not only for two, or three, or twenty people, but also for a whole population, the great and marvelous city of the Ninevites, which had knelt and bowed its head over this pit of perdition and was expecting to suffer

5. Gn 2.16.

7. Gn 3.20.

6. God's command in Gn 2.16.

the blow from above. Like a heavenly power overseeing Nineveh's charge, fasting snatched the city from these gates of death and returned Nineveh to life. If you want, let us also hear this story: "*Now the word of the Lord,*" it says, "*came to Jonah, saying, 'Rise and go to Nineveh, the great city.'*"⁸ Immediately, He wanted to put Jonah to shame by sending him to the great city of Nineveh, because he foresaw the prophet's escape. However, let us also listen to the preaching: "*Yet three days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*"⁹ Why do you, God, foretell the sufferings that you will inflict upon Nineveh? So that I will not do what I announced. This is why he threatened with hell: so He would not lead anyone away to hell. He says, "Fear that which is spoken to you and do not be saddened about what has been done." Why does He establish the appointed time to be only a period of three days? So that you may learn even the virtue of the barbarians—I call the Ninevites barbarians, who were able to annul in three days such anger caused by sin—and for you to marvel at the philanthropy of God, who was satisfied with three days of repentance for so many transgressions; and furthermore, so you will not sink into despair, although you have innumerable sins.

(5) Just as a slothful and contemptuous person neither does anything great for his soul nor reconciles himself to God by his laziness, even if he comes upon a lengthy, definite period of time for repentance, likewise he who is energetic and fervent in readiness reveals his repentance with tremendous zeal, and in the one brief, critical moment in time is able to obliterate transgressions spanning a very long time.¹⁰ Did Peter not deny Christ three times? Did he not utter a curse with the third time? Did he not dread the words of an insignificant handmaid? And what of it? Did he

8. Jon 1.1.

9. Jon 3.4.

10. "πολλοῦ χρόνου," literally translated here, means "a long period of time." Metaphorically, it means "a lifetime." Sincere repentance carries God's limitless redemptive power, which annihilates a lifetime of sin and disobedience.

require many years to achieve repentance? Not at all; he lapsed and was restored the same night; he accepted the wound and the medicine; he became ill and immediately returned to health. How and in what way? He cried and lamented bitterly; or, better yet, he did not simply cry, but with great pain and eagerness. This is why the evangelist did not say that he simply cried, but, "*He wept bitterly.*"¹¹ He says that no speech can bring home to the mind the tremendous power of those streams of tears. Yet, the outcome clearly brings this fact to light. After that grievous calamity,¹² because no evil exists equivalent to that of denial, He restored him to his former dignity, and He handed over to him the authority of the Universal Church; greatest of all, He proved to us that he, of all the apostles, had the most love for the Master. "*Peter,*" He asks him, "*do you love me more than these?*"¹³ This alone carries equal esteem as a virtue. So that you will not say that it was natural for Christ to be favorable toward the Ninevites, a barbarous and mindless people ("Since the servant," He says, "*who did not know the will of his lord and did not do it, will be beaten with a few stripes*").¹⁴ He brings Peter forward before all, a servant who recognized very well the will of his Lord. However, when he too sinned—indeed, the worst possible sin—see to what great height of boldness he ascended. Therefore, you, too: Do not fall down because of your sins.

(6) The worst part of sin is to persist in it, and the most terrible part of the calamity is to remain in it like a corpse. This is what Paul wails and laments bitterly; this, he says, is worth mourning. "*Perhaps, when I come to you, God will humble me and I will mourn for many,*"¹⁵ not for those who sinned only, but "*for those who did not repent of debauchery, the uncleanness and the fornication they committed.*"¹⁶ And what specific point of

11. Mt 26.75.

12. The metaphoric rendering of this key term “πτώμα” illustrates that sin renders the human being *a corpse*; repentance rejuvenates him.

13. Jn 21.15.

15. 2 Cor 12.21.

14. Lk 12.48.

16. Ibid.

time was more suitable for repentance than the season of the fast?

3

(7) However, let us return to the narrative. “*Hearing these words, the prophet¹⁷ went down to Joppa to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.*”¹⁸ Where are you fleeing, O man? Have you not heard the prophet saying: “*Where shall I go from your Spirit? And where shall I flee from your presence?*”¹⁹ “Shall I escape to the earth?” But “*The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.*”²⁰ “Maybe I can escape to hades?” “*And even if I descended to hades, you are found there.*”²¹ “Can I escape to heaven?” “*Even if I should go up to heaven, you are present there.*”²² “Maybe I can flee to the ocean?” “*Even there your right hand will hold me.*”²³ The same thing happened to [Jonah]. Such is sin; it throws our soul into tremendous mindlessness. For just as they who are afflicted with a heavy head and drunkenness simply go around in circles and without purpose (and whether it is an abyss, or even a cliff, or whatever else they are subjected to, they fall into it unguarded), likewise, they who slide off into sin, like people afflicted with drunkenness from the desire for the sinful act, do not know what they are doing; they foresee neither the present nor the future.

(8) Tell me, are you running away from the Master? Then, wait a little bit and you will learn from the state of affairs themselves that you will be unable to escape even from the hands of His servant, the ocean. For as soon as Jonah set foot on the ship, the ocean raised her waves up high and raised herself to a great height. And just as a considerate hand-maid, discovering that her fellow-slave has run away because he stole something of her master’s, does not revolt as previ-

¹⁷ Jonah.

¹⁸ Jon 1.3.

¹⁹ Ps 138.7.

²⁰ Ps 23.1.

²¹ Ps 138.8.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ps 138.10.

ously mentioned but submits the individuals who captured him to myriads of troubles until she seizes him and brings him back, likewise, the ocean found her fellow-slave and recognized him. She brought thousands upon thousands of obstacles before the sailors. She upset them and she shouted. She did not drag them to the court. Rather, she threatened to sink the entire ship if they did not surrender her fellow-slave to her. And what did the sailors do, perceiving these things? Scripture says: "*They threw overboard the wares that were in the ship into the sea; but the ship was not getting any lighter,*"²⁴ because the entire cargo still remained within it, the body of the prophet, the heavy cargo, not according to the nature of the body, but from the weight of sin. For nothing is so heavy and onerous to bear as sin and disobedience. For this reason Zechariah depicted it²⁵ in the likeness of a lead talent.²⁶ And David, in order to describe its nature, said: "*My iniquities have gone over my head; they have pressed heavily upon me like a heavy burden.*"²⁷ Christ exclaims often to those who were living in a state of sin: "*Come to me all you who labor and are heavy-laden, and I shall give you rest.*"²⁸ Therefore, sin at that time weighed down the ship and was about to sink it; but Jonah was asleep and snoring. His deep sleep was a result not of pleasure but of sorrow; not of relaxation but of faintheartedness. For prudent servants feel their sins immediately, something that happened to him. After he committed the sin, he then realized the dreadfulness of the sin. Such is sin that, after it is born, it rouses fully the throes of childbirth in the soul that gave it birth; this goes counter to the law of our birth. When we are born, we end the travails of childbirth at once; but as soon as sin is born, it tears asunder with distress the reasonings that gave it birth. Therefore, what did the ship's pilot do? He approached Jonah and said: "*Arise and call upon the Lord your God.*"²⁹ Furthermore, he understood from his expe-

24. Jon 1.5.

25. Sin and disobedience.

26. Cf. Zec 5.7.

27. Ps 37.4.

28. Mt 11.28.

29. Jon 1.16.

rience that the storm was not a usual one, but that the blow was God-sent, and that the billowy ocean was vastly superior to human skill, and that the hands of the helmsman were of no advantage. In this situation, a greater pilot was required, the one who governs the whole world; and the assistance from above was critical. For this reason, they abandoned the oars, the sails, the ropes, and everything else; they drew their hands back to themselves and raised them to heaven and entreated God. And since nothing else happened even then, "*they cast lots,*"³⁰ Scripture says. And then the lot revealed the one responsible. Not even then did they grab him to throw him into the ocean. Although such noise and confusion oppressed them, it was as if they were enjoying great tranquility. They established a court of justice on the ship and they charged him and summoned him to defend himself. And they examined everything in detail, as if they were responsible to someone else for their decision. Therefore, listen to them examining all the issues as in court: "What is your occupation? Where do you come from? Where are you going? From what country and people do you come?" In this manner, though the ocean accused him with her powerful roar and the lot convicted him and bore witness to him clearly, they arrived at their decision neither from the outcry of the ocean nor from the positive witness of the lot. Just as in court, the judges—when the accusers are present and the witnesses are found standing by and the examinations take place—do not arrive at their decision prematurely but wait until the accused himself becomes the accuser of his own sin, so here, the sailors, though barbarous and mindless, imitated the good order in the courts. If the fear was so great, the surf so severe, and the tumult that surrounded them so tremendous that the ocean did not allow them to catch their breath (she created such an uproar and she became so enraged with a frenzy and a savage roar, and she swelled up with force, her waves rising to great heights); then, from where, my beloved,

30. Jon 1.7

came the great foresight of the prophet? From the economy of God. God made these things happen so that the prophet might learn from them to be a lover of man and be subdued. Only to him did He cry out and say: "Imitate the sailors, the naïve men, who neither despise a single soul nor neglect a single body, yours. And you would allow to be destroyed, on your part, an entire city with myriads of inhabitants. These sailors, when they discovered who was responsible for all the evils that confronted them, still were not eager to condemn him; but you,³¹ who have no charge brought against you by the Ninevites, would convict and annihilate them. Yet, when I commanded you to go and, through preaching, summon them back to salvation, you disobeyed; they, who were not accountable to anyone, did all things and exerted themselves so that you, who are accountable, should not be punished." Although the ocean condemned him and the lot exposed him, when he implicated himself and confessed his flight, they still were not in a hurry to annihilate the prophet; rather, they demonstrated toleration and constraint and did everything possible to keep him from the fury of the ocean after such proof of his guilt. However, the ocean did not permit even this, or better yet, God did not allow this to happen, because He wanted to sober him through the sailors in the same way as through the whale. For this reason, when they heard, "*Take me up and cast me into the sea, and the sea will be calm to you,*"³² they strained to reach the shore, although the waves did not allow it.

4

(9) But you, just as you have seen the prophet escape, listen to him pray inside the belly of the beast; for the prophet suffered the one as a man; the other he exhibited as a prophet. Therefore the ocean took him; it placed him in the belly of a whale as in a prison, and the ocean and whale

31. Jonah.

32. Jon 1.12.

guarded the fugitive alive and well for the Master. The fierce waves did not take him and drown him, nor did a whale more fierce than the waves receive him in its belly to destroy him utterly. Rather the whale saved him and returned him to the city; both the ocean and the whale yielded against their natures, so that the prophet might thereby be instructed. He came to the city and read the decision like a royal epistle that withheld punishment and proclaimed, saying, "*Three days yet and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*"³³ They heard these things. It was not difficult for them to believe them. They did not despise these things; however, they all—men, women, slaves, masters, leaders, followers, children, the elderly—immediately took one road, the road of fasting. Not even the nature of the irrational animals remained uninitiated in this work; everywhere sackcloth, everywhere ashes, everywhere mourning and lamentation. Even he who wore the diadem descended from the royal throne, put on sackcloth, covered himself with ashes, and in this way rescued the city from danger. One sees this paradox, sackcloth surpassing the reputation of purple raiment. Whereas the purple robe could not prevail, sackcloth did. That which the crown could not promise, ashes achieved. Do you see it was not without reason that I said one should fear not fasting but drunkenness and gluttony? For drunkenness and gluttony shook the city that was unshakable, and they were about to overthrow it; fasting kept the city upright when it was tottering and about to fall.

(10) And Daniel, when he entered with fasting as his companion into the lions' pit, left it as if the lions were tame sheep and he their relative. These beasts were boiling with anger and scowled murderously, but they did not touch the prepared table. Although their nature excited them (since nothing is more ferocious than those beasts) and hunger incited them (because they had not partaken of food for seven days) they—as if some tamer were sitting there inside and

33. Jon 3:4.

shouting at them not to touch the flanks of the prophet—respected the nourishment. With fasting, even the three youths entered into the furnace of Babylon, and they kept company with this very fire, and then they marched out of the furnace. However, if that fire was truly fire, how did it not do whatever fire does? If those bodies were truly bodies, how did they not suffer what bodies suffer? How? Ask fasting and she will answer you; she will solve the enigma for you. For truly it was an enigma, since the nature of the bodies was battling with the nature of the fire, and the victory belonged to the nature of the bodies.

(11) Have you ever seen such a paradoxical battle? Have you ever seen such a paradoxical victory? Marvel at fasting and receive her with outstretched arms. For she helps even in the furnace, and protects in the lions' pit, and expels demons, and cancels God's decision, and represses the mania of the passions, and returns us to freedom, and creates great tranquility in our reasonings. Is it not the worst possible madness to avoid her and be afraid of her, who has so many goods in her hands? They say that she afflicts our body and makes it sickly. However, as much as the external man perishes, to that same degree the internal one renews himself day by day.³⁴ Even better, if you wanted to examine the matter carefully, you would discover that fasting is the mother who obtains our good state of health. And if you disbelieve my words, ask the physicians about these things, and they will tell you very clearly concerning wantonness and gluttony, that they are the mother who obtains our poor state of health, [which includes] the foot pains, and headaches, and apoplexies, and tuberculosis, and dropsy and morbid humors, and abscesses, and the multitude of other torrential diseases. These sicknesses which utterly destroy the good health of the body and the prudence of the soul are wicked streams that emanate from the most wicked fountain of wantonness and gluttony.

34. Cf. 2 Cor 4:16.

5

(12) Therefore, let us not be afraid of fasting, who delivers us from so many evils. And I do not give you this advice without cause. I see many men as if they are about to surrender themselves to a wild woman; to this degree they hesitate and withdraw and today they destroy themselves in drunkenness and gluttony. For this reason I advise, so you will not preempt with gluttony and drunkenness the inner benefit to be derived from fasting. Indeed, those who have stomach ailments, when they are about to drink bitter medicines, satiate themselves with nourishment and afterward take the medicines. They have endured the bitterness but lost the benefit, because they make the battle of the medicine more difficult against the wickedness of the humors that cause the utter destruction. For this reason, experienced physicians order them to sleep without eating so that, from the outset, all the power of the medicines will be launched immediately against the excessive evil humors. Likewise with fasting: if you gorge yourself today in drunkenness and tomorrow receive her medicine, you do so uselessly and in vain. You survive the toil, but you do not reap the benefit of the act, because the recent evil born from drunkenness spends all of fasting's power. If, through fasting, you make your body as light as possible and you receive the medicine with sober reasoning, you will be able to cleanse many of your old sins. Therefore, let us neither recover from drunkenness to fasting nor end up again in drunkenness after fasting, which can be compared to a sick body that rises from bed and, with one step, falls again and is injured much worse. The same thing happens in our souls, when from each place—from the beginning of fasting and from the end—we cast a dark shadow with the cloud of drunkenness on the cleanliness that we won from fasting. Just as they who are about to spar with beasts first protect their vital organs with many weapons and shields, and afterwards submit themselves to battle, likewise, now, there exist many men, who, when they are about

to spar with fasting as if with a beast, arm themselves very well with gluttony; when they burst and become dizzy from the foods, they greet the tame and tranquil gaze of fasting with great derangement. And if I ask you, "Why do you run today to the baths?" you will say, "So I can receive fasting with a clean body." And if I ask, "Why do you get drunk?" you will again say, "Because I will enter into the fast." And is it not strange to receive this most beautiful and auspicious feast³⁵ with a clean body but a filthy, drunken soul?

(13) Certainly there remains much more to say, but even these words are enough for the correction of the sober ones.³⁶ It is necessary for me to finish the discourse, since I now have the desire to hear our father's voice.³⁷ For we, like the little shepherds, play our small shepherd's pipe³⁸ sitting in the shadow of these sacred buildings as if under an oak tree or a poplar tree. But he like an excellent musician arouses the entire theater with the harmony of his golden cithara and, with the harmony of his words and actions inspires us to great benefit. Christ wants such teachers. He says: "*Whoever does and teaches [God's commandments] shall be called great in the Kingdom of the Heavens.*"³⁹ For this reason he is great in the Kingdom of the Heavens. And I hope that with his prayers and with those of all the assemblies,⁴⁰ we will be worthy of the Kingdom of the Heavens, by the grace and love toward Man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, belongs all the glory, both now and always, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

35. Feast here refers to the celebration of the Eucharist.

36. The sober ones are those who are attentive to Chrysostom's discourse.

37. Here, it seems that Chrysostom has in mind the local bishop, Flavian of Antioch, who was in his company and who spoke once he finished his sermon.

38. Literally, "a small reed" or "λεπτῷ τῷ καλάμῳ."

39. Mt 5.19.

40. Councils of bishops or holy fathers.