

Who compelled you? Who forced you in spite of your resistance and your efforts to escape?" But no such thing will ever be said of you. Nor can you charge yourself with such a fault, for everybody knows that you did not make the least effort to obtain that dignity; the whole project came from others. Hence the point which leaves others no excuse for their faults supplies you with abundant matter for your justification.

CHRYSTOSTOM. On this I shook my head, and smiling quietly at his simplicity, I said: I should be very glad, my dearest friend, that the case were as you say, not that I might be able to undertake the office, which I have just now declined. For even were I exposed to no chastisement for feeding the flock of Christ in a negligent and unskilful manner, I would regard it as worse than any chastisement to appear to be ungrateful to him who had so trusted me as to confide to me a matter of such importance. For what reason then would I desire that your opinion were not without foundation? That those wretched and unhappy men—for so they deserve to be called, who are incapable of rightly managing this business, though you will say they were compelled by force and erred through ignorance—that those wretched men might be able to escape the fire this is not extinguished, and the outer darkness and the worm that dieth not, and might not be separated, and perish with the hypocrites. But what would you have me to do, this is impossible.

And if you permit me, I shall prove the truth of what I say, first of all by reference to the royal

power which is not of so much importance in the eyes of God as is the priesthood.

It was not at his own desire that Saul, the son of Cis,* was made king, but he went in quest of the asses, and began to consult the prophet concerning them, and the prophet spoke to him of a kingdom. Yet not even then did he show eagerness, though it was a prophet that spoke to him. But he declined and begged to be excused, saying: "Who am I, and what is my father's house?" What then? When he had made a bad use of the rank to which God had raised him, were these words sufficient to screen him from the wrath of Him who had made him king? Yet he might have said to Samuel when he rebuked him: "Did I hasten to assume the power of king? Did I intrude myself into this dignity? My desire was to lead the leisured and quiet life of a private individual; you forced me into this dignity. Had I remained in that humble station I should easily have escaped my present troubles. For were I one of the ordinary people, and undistinguished, I should never have been sent to execute the present task, nor would God have entrusted me with the war against the Amalecites. And had I not been entrusted with it, I should never have committed this fault." But all these reasons were insufficient to excuse him, and not merely insufficient, but they made his case worse, for they excited the anger of God still more. For one who has been honoured beyond his deserts ought not to put forward the greatness of his rank as an excuse for his faults,

* 1 Kings ix.

but he should use God's great love as a motive to make greater progress in virtue. To think that one is at liberty to sin because one has obtained higher dignity is nothing else than to try to make the goodness of God a pretext for sin, as the impious and the careless are wont to do. But such should not be our sentiments, nor should we be so foolish; but we should endeavour, as far as in us lies, to speak and think reverently.

But, to pass from the royal power to the priesthood with which we are now concerned, Heli did not make an effort to obtain that dignity. Yet what did that avail him when he sinned? And why do I say he made no effort to obtain the office? He could not have escaped from it, even if he desired, since the law laid it upon him. For he was of the tribe of Levi, and he was obliged to accept the dignity which devolved on him by descent. Yet even he suffered no slight punishment on account of the frowardness of his sons. What shall I say of him who was the first priest of the Jews, and of whom God spoke such great things to Moses? Because he was unable single-handed to resist the folly of so great a multitude, he was on the verge of destruction, had not the intercession of his brother averted the anger of God.*

And as I have mentioned Moses, his fate furnishes an excellent proof of what I assert. This same blessed Moses was so far from grasping at the chief place amongst the Jews that he declined it when offered, and though commanded by God he resisted so far as to provoke

* Exod. xxxii, 10.

His anger.* And this was his disposition not only on that occasion, but later on, when he held supreme authority, he would gladly have died in order to be relieved of it. For he said, "Kill me if you are to deal with me thus."† What then? When he sinned on the occasion of drawing water from the rock, were these objections sufficient to excuse him and to move God to pardon him?‡ For what other reason was he deprived of entering the promised land? For no other reason, as we all know, than for this fault, in consequence of which that admirable man could not obtain what was granted to his subjects. But after many fatigues and labours, after indescribable wanderings and wars and victories, he died outside the land, for sake of which he had undergone so many toils. After suffering the hardships of the voyage he did not enjoy the good things of the harbour. Do you understand then, that not only those who grasp at this dignity, but even those who are promoted to it by the efforts of others, have no excuse left to them if they sin? For if they who resisted, though God called them, were so severely punished, if nothing could exempt from such a calamity an Aaron or a Heli, or that blessed man who was a saint, a prophet, the meekest of men on earth, who spoke to God as to a friend,§ it will hardly be a sufficient excuse for us who are so far inferior to them in virtue, to say that we are conscious of having made no effort to obtain this dignity. And most of all now when many

* Exod. iv, 13.

† Numb. xi, 15.

‡ Numb. xx, 12.

§ Numb. xii, 3; Exod. xxxiii, 11.

ordinations have their origin, not in divine grace, but in human efforts.

God made choice of Judas and admitted him to that holy college and conferred the apostolic dignity on him as well as on the others; He even confided to him something more than to the rest, namely, the dispensation of money.* What then? When he had fulfilled both offices badly, when he had betrayed Him whom he had undertaken to preach, and had mis-spent the money entrusted to his management, did he escape punishment? For this very reason the chastisement he brought on himself was the greater, and justly so. For the dignities that have been conferred by God should not be used to offend Him, but to please Him the more. Now for a man who has been honoured more than others to claim exemption from the chastisement he deserves, would be the same as if one of the incredulous Jews, on hearing Christ say, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; if I had not done among them works which no other man hath done, they would not have sin,"† should accuse his Saviour and benefactor, and say: "Why didst Thou come and speak? Why didst Thou perform miracles in order to punish us more severely?" But this is the language of madness and of utter insanity. For the Physician came to heal, not in order that He might condemn with greater severity, but in order to deliver you completely from your malady. But you of your own choice have withdrawn yourself from His care; receive therefore a more severe

* John xii, 6.

† John xv, 22.

punishment! For as you would have been delivered from your sins had you submitted to treatment, so you can no longer be purified from them, since you fled when you saw Him approach, and as you cannot, you will suffer punishment for them, as well as for having, as far as in you lay, rendered His solicitude vain. Therefore the punishment we shall endure after having been raised to honour by God is not the same as we would have suffered before promotion, but much more severe; for he who is not improved by benefits justly deserves to be more rigorously chastised. Since then this defence has been shown to be worthless, and since so far from saving, it rather betrays such as rely upon it, we should provide ourselves with some other means of safety.

BASIL. Of what kind? For I no longer know where I am, with such fear and terror have your words inspired me.

CHRYSOSTOM. I beg and implore you, said I, be not so downcast. For me, as I am weak, my security is never to get into that position; but for you, as you are strong, your security is to place your hope of salvation in nothing else, after God's grace, but in doing nothing unworthy of such a gift and of God who bestowed it. For they deserve the severest punishment who, having by their own efforts obtained that dignity, do not make a good use of it, either from sloth, or malice, or inexperience. And for the same reason even they who obtained it without any efforts of their own merit no indulgence, but they too are deprived of every excuse. In my opinion, then, though called and pressed by many, a man

ought to pay no attention to them; but he should first of all examine his own soul, and weigh everything carefully, and only then should he yield to pressure. For no man would venture to undertake to build a house unless he were a builder, nor would any man undertake to heal the sick unless he had a knowledge of medicine. But though pressed by many, he would decline, and would not be ashamed to admit his ignorance. And will a man to whom the care of so many souls is about to be confided neglect to examine himself, and will he undertake the ministry, in spite of his ignorance, because he is urged by one, pressed by a second, and is afraid to offend a third? Does he not of his own choice cast himself into the abyss along with them? And while he might have been saved by himself, he drags others with him to destruction. Whence can he hope for salvation? Whence can he obtain pardon? Who shall then be our advocates? Will it be those who now offer violence and compel us? But who will save themselves on that day? They too shall need intercessors in order to escape the fire. Now to prove that I do not say this to fill you with alarm, but because truth requires it, give ear to what the Blessed Paul says to his disciple Timothy, his true and well-beloved son: "Impose not hands lightly upon any man; neither be a partaker of other men's sins."* Do you perceive, then, from what blame and from what chastisement I have as far as in me lay preserved those who wished to promote me to that dignity?

2. For it is not enough for him who is elected

* 1 Tim. v, 22.

to say in his defence, "It was not of my own accord I approached," "It was through ignorance I did not fly"; so it will not avail the electors to say, "I did not know the candidate." But their sin is the greater because they promoted one whom they did not know, and what they took to be their justification increases their responsibility. Is it not absurd that when they want to purchase a slave, men will show him to the physicians and require sureties for the purchase, and make inquiry from the neighbours, and after all this they are by no means confident, but they ask a long period of time for trial; and yet when they desire to promote any one to so great a ministry they give testimony and vote for any one whatever without any further inquiry, rashly and at random, through partiality to some or enmity towards others. Who will be our intercessor on that day when they who should be our advocates will stand in need of advocates themselves? Hence it behoves the elector to make a full examination beforehand, and much more is this the duty of him who is to be ordained. For though he may have his electors as partakers of his punishment if he sins, yet he will not himself escape chastisement, but he will be punished more severely, unless perhaps the electors acted contrary to their conscience. For if it is found that they have committed such a fault, and have for some reason or other elected a person whom they knew to be certainly unworthy, both will suffer equal punishment, and perhaps the punishment of those who elected an unworthy person will be more severe. For whoever affords an opportunity to one who has a mind to injure the

Church is responsible for his misdeeds. But if the elector is open to none of these charges, and can say that he was deceived by the mistaken opinion of the public, he will not indeed go unpunished on that account, yet he will be punished less severely than the person elected. Why? Because it is natural to suppose that the electors, misled by the erroneous opinion of the public, acted as they did, but the person elected cannot, like them, say, "I did not know myself." Hence, as he is exposed to be more severely punished than the electors, he should examine himself more carefully than they; and if, through ignorance, they constrain him, he should come forward and state the reasons, which may disabuse them of their error, and by thus showing himself to be undeserving of election, free himself from so great a burden. How comes it that when warfare, commerce or other secular business is in question, a farmer will not undertake the management of a ship, nor a soldier of tillage, nor a pilot of warfare, even under the pressure of repeated threats of death. The reason is, that they foresee the risk that would arise from their want of experience. When matters of no great importance are in question we act with such prudence and do not yield to the violence of pressure; and when everlasting punishment awaits those who are unable to fulfil the office of the priesthood, shall we rashly and readily throw ourselves into such danger under pretext that we have been constrained by others? But the judge will not admit such a plea on that day. We ought to look for greater security in spiritual than in carnal things; but now it is

evident we do not give them even equal consideration. Tell me, pray, if we employed a man, believing him to be a mason, though not really such, and if he acceded to our request, but on putting his hand to the material prepared for the building, spoiled both wood and stone, and built in such a way that the house would immediately fall, would it be enough for him to say in his defence that it was not of his own choice he had undertaken the work? By no means. And very justly. For he ought to have resisted, even though others urged him on. There is then no means of escaping punishment, when a man spoils wood and stone; and if a man ruins souls, and has been negligent in their edification, can it be thought sufficient for him to escape punishment, to say that he was constrained by others? * Is not this

* In the third homily on the Acts of the apostles, delivered when he was Archbishop of Constantinople, St Chrysostom speaks as follows of the responsibility of priests: "I do not speak rashly, but as I feel and think. I do not think that many priests are saved, but that those who perish are far more numerous. The reason is that the office requires a great soul. For there are many things to make a priest swerve from rectitude, and he requires great vigilance on every side. Do you not perceive how many qualities a bishop must have that he may be apt to teach, patient towards the wicked, firm and faithful in teaching the word? How many difficulties herein! Moreover, the loss of others is imputed to him. I need say no more. If but one dies without baptism, does it not entirely endanger his salvation? For the loss of one soul is so great an evil as no man can understand. If the salvation of one soul is of such importance that, for its sake, the Son of God became man and suffered so much, think of the penalty the loss of one soul will entail. If he who kills a man in this life deserves death, how much more the others? Say not then to me: It was a priest or a deacon that sinned. The faults of these are imputed to those who elected them. . . . "If then one were to

an excess of folly? And I have not yet added, that no man can be compelled against his will. But granting that he suffered great pressure, and that he yielded only when assailed by various stratagems, will this exempt him from punishment? I beg of you, let us not deceive ourselves so much, nor pretend to be ignorant of what is evident even to children. For assuredly on the accounting day this pretence of ignorance will not avail us: you were conscious of your own inability, and you did not ambition this dignity? This was right and proper. You ought then to have declined it with the same resolution, though others called you to it; you were weak and incompetent when no one called you; but when there were found persons to bestow the dignity on you, did you all at once become strong? This is ridiculous and trifling, and merits the severest punishment. For this reason the Lord also exhorts a man who purposes to build a tower not to lay the foundations until he examines his resources, in order that he may not give the passers by great reason to laugh at him. Yet that man's loss goes no further than being laughed at. But in our case the punishment is unquenchable fire, the worm that dieth not, gnashing of teeth, outer darkness, being separated and ranked with the hypocrites. Yet my accusers are unwilling to give heed to any of these things, else they would

approach to the chief priesthood as an office full of solicitude and anxiety, no one would undertake it. On the contrary, nowadays, we aspire to this dignity as if it were a secular office, for sake of glory and honour before men. What advantage will this honour bring?"

From the Third Homily on the Acts of the Apostles.

have ceased to blame me for not wishing to perish to no purpose. For the duty laid upon us regards not the dispensation of wheat or barley, nor the care of oxen and sheep and the like, but the very body of Christ. For the Church of Christ, according to the Blessed Paul, is the body of Christ;* and it is meet that he to whom that body is entrusted, should bestow the greatest attention on its welfare and its beauty, and should take great care that neither spot nor wrinkle nor any such stain mar its grace and comeliness.† And what is this but to make it, as far as man can do, worthy of its pure and blessed head? If they who strive to acquire the constitution of an athlete require physicians, training masters, a temperate regimen, frequent exercise, and endless attention, and if the least thing be neglected, it upsets and spoils everything; how shall they whose office it is to take care of the body of Christ, which has to contend not against men, but against the invisible powers, how shall they preserve that body in health and vigour unless they are endowed with a virtue more than human, and are skilled in every useful method of healing the soul?

3. Know you not that this body is subject to more diseases and accidents than our carnal body, and is more easily injured, and more slowly healed? The physicians of the body have, at their disposal, a variety of medicines, different sorts of instruments, a regimen adapted to the patient, and the quality of the air is sometimes of itself sufficient to cure the invalid. Some-

* Col. i, 18. † Eph. v, 27.

On the Priesthood

A TREATISE IN SIX BOOKS

By Saint John Chrysostom

Translated by the

Rev. PATRICK BOYLE, C.M.

Let thy priests be clothed with justice,
and let thy saints rejoice.—*Ps.* cxxxi, 9.

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