

# Exposition on Psalm 105

by St. Augustine

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*The Psalm 105 is a call to praise and worship God, to seek His face evermore, and to remember His marvellous works, while also acknowledging His covenant and faithfulness, and His provident and protective care for His people.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 104:1-2, Psalm 104:4, Psalm 104:8, Psalm 104:12, Psalm 105:2, Psalm 105:4, Matthew 6:9, Matthew 11:25, John 21:17, Romans 8:25

**Topics:** "Divine Providence", "Faithfulness Of God"

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## Description

St. Augustine preaches on the Psalms, highlighting the praises and confessions to the Lord, the importance of seeking God's face continually, and the everlasting covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He emphasizes God's faithfulness in leading the Israelites out of Egypt, showcasing His power through the plagues and provision in the desert. Augustine reflects on the divine blessings bestowed upon the Israelites, attributing the merit of faith to Abraham for God's fulfillment of His promises.

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## Transcript

1. This Psalm is the first of those to which is prefixed the word Allelujah; the meaning of which word, or rather two words, is, Praise the Lord. For this reason he begins with praises: O confess unto the Lord, and call upon His Name Psalm 104:1; for this confession is to be understood as praise, just as these words of our Lord, I confess to You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth. Matthew 11:25 For after commencing with praise, calling upon God is wont to follow, whereunto he that prays does next add his longings: whence the Lord's Prayer itself has at the commencement a very brief praise, in these words, Our Father which art in Heaven. Matthew 6:9 The things prayed for, then follow....This also follows, Tell the people what things He has done; John 21:17 or rather, to translate literally from the Greek, as other Latin copies too have it, Preach the Gospel of His works among the Gentiles. Unto whom is this addressed, save unto the Evangelists in prophecy?

2. O sing unto Him, and play on instruments unto Him Psalm 104:2. Praise Him both by word and deed; for we sing with the voice, while we play with an instrument, that is, with our hands. Let your talking be of all His wondrous works. Be praise in His holy Name Psalm 104:3. These two verses may without any absurdity seem paraphrases of the two words above; so that, Let your talking be of all His wondrous works, may express the words, O sing unto Him; and what follows, be ye praised in His holy Name, may be referred to the words, and play on instruments unto Him; the former relating to the good word wherewith we sing unto Him, in which His wondrous works are told; the latter to the good work, in which

sweet music is played unto Him, so that no man may wish to be praised for a good work on the score of his own power to do it. For this reason, after saying, be ye praised, which assuredly they who work well deservedly may, he added, in His holy Name, since he that glories, let him glory in the Lord. 1 Corinthians 1:31 ...This is to be praised in His holy Name. Whence we read also in another Psalm: My soul shall be praised in the Lord: let the meek hear thereof, and be glad; which here in a sense follows, Let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord: for thus the meek are glad, who do not rival with a bitter jealousy those whom they imitate as already workers of good.

3. Seek the Lord, and be strengthened Psalm 104:4. This is very literally construed from the Greek, though it may seem not a Latin word: whence other copies have, be ye confirmed; others, be ye corroborated....While these words, then, Come unto Him, and be enlightened, apply to seeing; those in the text relate to doing: Seek the Lord, and be strengthened....But what means, Seek His face evermore? I know indeed that to cling unto God is good for me; but if He is always being sought, when is He found? Did he mean by evermore, the whole of the life we live here, whence we become conscious that we ought thus to seek, since even when found He is still to be sought? To wit, faith has already found Him, but hope still seeks Him. But love has both found Him through faith, and seeks to have Him by sight, where He will then be found so as to satisfy us, and no longer to need our search. For unless faith discovered Him in this life, it would not be said, Seek the Lord. Also, if when discovered by faith, He were not still to be diligently sought, it would not be said, For if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. Romans 8:25 ...And truly this is the sense of the words, Seek His face evermore; meaning that discovery should not terminate that seeking, by which love is testified, but with the increase of love the seeking of the discovered One should increase.

4. Remember, he says, His marvellous works that He has done, His wonders, and the judgments of His mouth Psalm 104:5. This passage seems like that, You shall say unto the children of Israel, I Am has sent me unto you: an expression which, in ever so small part, scarce a mind takes in. Then mentioning His own Name, He mercifully mingled in His grace towards men, saying, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; this is My Name for ever. Exodus 3:14-15 By which He would have it to be understood, that they whose God He declared Himself lived with Him for ever, and He said this, which might be understood even by children, that they who by the great powers of love knew how to seek His face for evermore, might according to their capacity comprehend, I Am that I Am.

5. Unto whom is it said, O you seed of Abraham His servant, you children of Jacob, His chosen? Psalm 104:6....He next adds, He is the Lord our God: His judgments are in all the world Psalm 104:7. Is He the God of the Jews only? Romans 3:29 God forbid! He is the Lord our God: because the Church, where His judgments are preached, is in all the world....

6. He has been always mindful of His covenant Psalm 104:8. Other copies read, for evermore; and this arises from the ambiguity of the Greek. But if we are to understand alway of this world and not of eternity, why, when he explains what covenant He was mindful of, does he add, The word that He made to a thousand generations? Now this may be understood with a certain limitation; but he afterwards says, Even the covenant that He made with Abraham Psalm 104:9: and the oath that He swore unto Isaac; and appointed the same unto Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting testament Psalm 104:10.

But if in this passage the Old Testament is to be understood, on account of the land of Canaan; for thus the language of the Psalm runs, saying, Unto you will I give the land of Canaan: the lot of your inheritance Psalm 104:11: how is it to be understood as everlasting, since that earthly inheritance could not be

everlasting? And for this reason it is called the Old Testament, because it is abolished by the New. But a thousand generations do not seem to signify anything eternal, since they involve an end; and yet are also too numerous for this very temporal state.

For by howsoever few years a generation is limited, such as in Greek is called ἡμίχρον time of Abraham, when that promise was made him, unto the New Testament, but from Adam himself down to the end of the world? For who would dare to say that this world should last for 15000 years? Hence it seems to me that we ought not to understand here the Old Testament, which it said through the prophet was to be cancelled by the New: Behold, the days come, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant.

Jeremiah 31:31-32 ...After saying, He has been mindful of His covenant unto an age; which we ought to understand as lasting for evermore, the covenant, namely, of justification and an eternal inheritance, which God has promised to faith; he adds, and the Word that He commanded unto a thousand generations. What means commanded?...The command then was faith, that the righteous should live by faith; Romans 1:17 and an eternal inheritance is set before this faith. A thousand generations, then, are, on account of the perfect number, to be understood for all; that is, as long as generation succeeds generation, so long is it commanded to us to live by faith.

This the people of God does observe, the sons of promise who succeed by birth, and depart by death, until every generation be finished; and this is signified by the number thousand; because the solid square of the number ten, ten times ten, and this taken ten times amounts to a thousand. Even the covenant, he says, which He made with Abraham: and the oath that He swore unto Isaac; and appointed the same unto Jacob, that is, Jacob himself, for a law. These are the very three patriarchs, whose God He calls Himself in a special sense, whom the Lord also does name in the New Testament, where He says, Many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 8:11 This is everlasting inheritance....

7. He next follows out the history well known in the truth of the holy Scriptures. When they were in small numbers, very few, and they strangers in the land Psalm 104:12; that is, in the land of Canaan....But some copies have the words very few, and they strangers, in the accusative case, the translator having turned the Greek phrase too literally into Latin. If we were to render the whole clause in this way, we must say, that they were very few, and they strangers; but the phrase, while they were, is the meaning of the Greek; and the verb, to be, takes not an accusative, but a nominative after it.

8. What time as they went from one nation to another, from one kingdom to another people Psalm 104:13. This is a repetition of what he had said, from one nation to another. He suffered no man to do them harm: but reprov'd even kings for their sakes Psalm 104:14. Touch not, He said, Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm Psalm 104:15. He declares the words of God chiding or reproving kings, that they might not harm the holy fathers, while they were small in number, very few, and they strangers in the land of Canaan. Although these words be not read in the books of that history, yet they are to be understood as either secretly spoken, as God speaks in the hearts of men by unseen and true visions, or even as announced through an Angel. For both the king of Gerar and the king of the Egyptians were warned from Heaven not to harm Abraham, and another king not to harm Isaac, Genesis 26:8-11 and others not to harm Jacob; while they were very few, and strangers, before he went over into Egypt to sojourn with his sons: which is understood to be herein mentioned. But since it occurred to ask, before they passed over and multiplied in Egypt, how so few in number, and those strangers in a foreign land, could maintain themselves: he next adds, He suffered no man to do them wrong, etc.

9. But it may well excite a question, in what sense they were styled (Christs, or) anointed, before there was any unction, from which this title was given to the kings.. ..Whence then were those patriarchs at that time called anointed? For that they were prophets, we read concerning Abraham; and certainly, what is manifestly said of him, should be understood of them also. Are they styled christs, because, even though secretly, yet they were already Christians? For although the flesh of Christ came from them, nevertheless Christ came before them; for He thus answered the Jews, Before Abraham was, I am. John 8:58 But how could they not know Him, or not believe in Him; since they are called prophets for this very reason, because, though somewhat darkly, they announced the Lord beforehand? Whence He says Himself openly, Your father Abraham desired to see My day, and he saw it, and was glad. John 8:56 For no man was ever reconciled unto God outside of that faith which is in Christ Jesus, either before His Incarnation, or after: as it is most truly defined by the Apostle: For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus. 1 Timothy 2:5

10. He then begins to relate how it happened that they went from one nation to another, from one kingdom to another people. He calls, he says, for a famine upon the land: and broke all the staff of bread Psalm 104:16. Thus it happened that they went from one nation to another, from one kingdom to another people. But the expressions of the holy Scriptures are not to be negligently passed by. He called, he says, for a famine upon the land; as if famine were some person, or some animated body, or some spirit that would obey Him who called....Under this impression the old Romans consecrated some such deities, as the goddess Fever, and the god Paleness. Or means it, as is more credible, He said there should be famine; so that calling be the same thing as mentioning by name; mentioning by name, as speaking; speaking, as commanding? Nor does the Apostle say, Romans 4:17 He calls those things which be not, that they may be; but, as though they were. For with God that has already happened which, according to His disposition, is fixed for the future: for of Him it is elsewhere said, He who made things to come. Isaiah 45:11 And here when famine happened, then it is said to have been called, that is, that that which had been determined in His secret government, might be realized. Lastly, he at once expounds, how He called for the famine, saying, He broke all the staff of bread.

11. But He had sent a man before them Psalm 104:17. What man? Even Joseph. How did He send him? Joseph was sold to be a bond-servant. When this happened, it was the sin of his brethren, and, nevertheless, God sent Joseph into Egypt. We should therefore meditate on this important and necessary subject, how God uses well the evil works of men, as they on the other hand use ill the good works of God.

12. Next he does relate the story, mentioning what Joseph suffered in his low estate, and how he was raised on high. His feet they hurt in the stocks: the iron entered into his soul, until his word came Psalm 104:18. That Joseph was put in irons, we do not indeed read; but we ought no ways to doubt that it was so. For some things might be passed over in that history, which nevertheless would not escape the Holy Spirit, who speaks in these Psalms. We understand by the iron which entered into his soul, the tribulation of stern necessity; for he did not say body, but soul.

There is a somewhat similar expression in the Gospel, where Simeon says unto Mary, A sword shall pierce through your own soul also. Luke 2:35 That is, the Passion of the Lord, which was a fall unto many, and in which the secrets of many hearts were revealed, since their sentiments respecting the Lord were extorted from them, without doubt made His own Mother exceeding sorrowful, heavily struck with human bereavement. Now Joseph was in this tribulation, until his word came, with which he truly interpreted dreams: whence he was introduced to the king, that unto him also he might foretell what would happen in respect to his dreams.

Genesis xli But since he said, Until his words were heard, that we might not altogether so understand his, that any one might think so great an event was to be ascribed unto man; he at once added, The word of the Lord inflamed him Psalm 104:19; or, as other copies have it more closely from the Greek, The word of the Lord fired him, that he also might be reputed among those to whom it is said, Receive ye praise in His holy Name. 13. The king sent and loosed him, the prince of the peoples, and let him go free Psalm 104:20.

The king is the same as the prince of the peoples: he loosed him from his bonds and let him go free from his prison. He made him lord also of his house: and ruler of all his substance Psalm 104:21. That he might inform his princes like himself, and teach his old men wisdom Psalm 104:22. The Greek has, and teach his elders wisdom. Which might altogether be rendered to the letter thus; Might inform his princes like himself, and make his elders wise. The word translated old men being presbyters or elders, not gerontas, old men: and to teach wisdom being from the Greek to sophize, which cannot be rendered by a single word in Latin, and is from the word sophia, wisdom, different from prudence, which is in Greek phronesis.

Yet we do not read this in the high elevation of Joseph, as we read not of fetters in his low estate. But how could it happen that so great a man, the worshipper of the One True God, while in Egypt, should have been intent upon the nourishing of bodies, and the government of carnal matters only, and have felt no anxiety for souls, and how he could render them better? But those things are written in that history, which, according to the intention of the writer, in whom was the Holy Spirit, were judged sufficient for signifying future events in that narration.

14. Joseph also came into Egypt, and Jacob was a stranger in the land of Ham Psalm 104:23. Israel is the same with Jacob, as is Egypt with the land of Ham. Here it is very plainly shown, that the Egyptian race sprang from the seed of Chain, the son of Noah, whose first-born was Canaan. So that in those copies wherein in this passage Canaan is read, we must alter the reading. It is better construed, was a stranger, than dwelt, as other copies have it: which would be the same as was an inhabitant, for it means nothing different; the very same word is used in the Greek passage above, where it is said, Very few, and they strangers in the land. Moreover, the state of an incola or accola does not signify a native, but a stranger. Behold how they went from one nation to another. What had been briefly proposed, has been briefly explained in the narration. But from what kingdom they passed over to another people may well be asked. For they were not yet reigning in the land of Canaan, because the kingdom of the people of Israel had not yet been established there. How then can it be understood, except by anticipation, because the kingdom of their seed was destined there to exist?

15. Next is related what happened in Egypt. And He increased, he says, His people exceedingly, and made them stronger than their enemies Psalm 104:24. Even the whole of this is briefly set forth, in order that the manner in which it took place may be afterwards related. For the people of God was not made stronger than their enemies the Egyptians, at the time when their male offspring were slain, or when they were worn out with making bricks; but when by His powerful hand, by the signs and portents of the Lord their God, they became objects of fear and of honour, until the opposition of the hardened king was overcome, and the Red Sea overwhelmed the persecutor with his army.

16. And He turned their heart so, that they hated His people, and dealt untruly with His servants Psalm 104:25. Is it to be in any wise understood or believed, that God turns man's heart to do sin?...For they were not good before they hated His people; but being malignant and ungodly, they were such as would readily envy their prosperous sojourners. And so, in that He multiplied His own people, this bountiful act turned the wicked to envy. For envy is the hatred of another's prosperity. In this sense, therefore, He

turned their heart, so that through envy they hated His people, and dealt untruly with His servants. It was not then by making their hearts evil, but by doing good to His people, that He turned their hearts, that were evil of their own accord, to hatred. For He did not pervert a righteous heart, but turned one perverted of its own accord to the hatred of His people, while He was to make a good use of that evil; not by making them evil, but by lavishing blessings upon those, which the wicked might most readily envy.

17. The following verses, which are sung in praise of Him when Allelujah is chanted, show how He used this hatred of theirs, both for the trial of His own people, and for the glory of His Name, which is profitable for us. He sent Moses His servant, and Aaron whom He had chosen him Psalm 104:26. Whom He had chosen, would be sufficient; but there is no difficulty in the addition of him. It is a phrase of Scripture, as, The land in which they shall dwell in it: a phrase which the divine pages are full of.

18. He set forth in them the words of His tokens, and of His wonders in the land of Ham Psalm 104:27. We ought not to understand by the words of His tokens, words literally, words with which the tokens and wonders were worked, that is, which they uttered, that these tokens and wonders might take place. For many were performed without words, either with a rod, or with outstretched hand, or by ashes sent towards heaven....

19. He sent darkness, and made it dark Psalm 104:28. This is also written among the plagues with which the Egyptians were smitten. But what follows, is variously read in different copies. For some have, and they provoked His words; while others read, and they provoked not His words; but the reading first mentioned we have found in most; while, where the negative particle is added, we could hardly discover two copies. But perhaps the false reading has abounded owing to the easy sense; for what is easier understood than this, They provoked His words, that is, by their contumacious rebellions? We have endeavoured to explain the other reading also according to some true sense: and this for the present occurs: They provoked not His words, that is, in Moses and Aaron; because they most patiently bore with a very stiffnecked people, until all things which God had determined to work by them, were fulfilled in order.

20. He turned their waters into blood, and slew their fish Psalm 104:29. He made their land frogs, yea, even in the king's chambers Psalm 104:30: as if he were to say, He turned their land into frogs. For there was so great a multitude of frogs, that this might well be said by hyperbole.

21. He spoke the word, and there came all manner of flies, and lice in all their quarters Psalm 104:31. If it be asked when He spoke, it was in His Word before it took place; and there it was, without time, at what time it should take place: although even then He commanded it to be done, when it was to be done, through Angels, and through his servants Moses and Aaron.

22. He made their rains hail Psalm 104:32. It is a similar expression to the former, He made their land frogs; except that the whole land was not actually turned into frogs, though the whole of the rain may have been turned into hail. A burning fire in their land: understand, He sent.

23. He smote their vines also and fig-trees; and broke every tree of their coasts Psalm 104:33. This was done by the violence of the hail, and by lightnings; whence he spoke of the fire as burning.

24. He spoke the word, and the locust came, and the caterpillar, of which there was no number Psalm 104:34. The locusts and the caterpillars are one plague: of which the one is the parent, the other the offspring.

25. And did eat up all the grass in their land, and devoured the fruit of the ground Psalm 104:35. Even grass is fruit, as Scripture is wont to speak, which calls even the ripe grain grass; but it wished these two things to harmonize in number with the two which it had spoken of before, that is, the locust and the caterpillar. But the whole of this does belong to the variety of speech, which is a remedy for weariness, not to any difference of senses.

26. He smote every first-born in their land: even the first-fruits of all their strength Psalm 104:36. This is the last plague, excepting the death in the Red Sea. The first-fruits of all their strength, I imagine to be an expression derived from the first-born of cattle. These plagues are ten in number, but they are not all mentioned, nor in the same order in which they are there read to have happened. For praise-giving is free from the law which binds one who is relating or composing a history. And since the Holy Spirit is the Author and Dictator, through the Prophet, of this praise; by the very same authority with which He guided him who wrote that history, he does both mention something to have taken place which is not there read, and passes over what is there read.

27. Now he adds this also to the praises of God, that He led the Israelites out of Egypt enriched with silver and gold; because even they were then in such a condition, that they could not as yet despise the just and due, though temporal, reward of their toils....He brought them forth also in silver and gold Psalm 104:37: this too is a Scripture idiom; for in silver and gold is said for the same as if it had been said with silver and gold: there was not one feeble person among their tribes: in body, not in mind. This also was a great blessing of God, that in this necessity of removal there was no infirm person.

28. Egypt was glad at their departing: for their fear fell upon them Psalm 104:38; that is, the fear of the Hebrews upon the Egyptians. For their fear is not that with which the Hebrews feared, but that with which they were feared. Some one will say, how then were the Egyptians unwilling to dismiss them? Why did they let them go as if they expected them to return? Why did they lend them gold and silver, as to men who were to return, and to repay them, if Egypt was glad at their departing? But we must understand, after that final destruction of the Egyptians, and the terrible overthrow of the mighty pursuing army in the Red Sea, that the rest of the Egyptians feared lest the Hebrews should return, and with great ease crush the relics of them: illustrating what he had stated, that He made His people stronger than their enemies.

29. He now proceeds to the divine blessings which were conferred upon them as they wandered in the desert. He spread out a cloud to be their covering: and fire to give them light in the night season Psalm 104:39. This is as clear as it is well known.

30. They asked, and the quail came Psalm 104:40. They did not desire quails, but flesh. But since the quail is flesh, and in this Psalm he speaks not of the provocation of those who did not please God, but of the faith of the elect, the true seed of Abraham; they are to be understood to have desired that that might come which might crush the murmurs of those who provoked. Then in the next line, And He filled them with the bread of heaven, he has not indeed named manna, but it is obscure to none who has read those records.

31. He opened the rock of stone, and the waters flowed out: so that rivers ran in the dry places Psalm 104:41. This fact too is understood as soon as read.

32. But in all these blessings of His, God does commend in Abraham the merit of faith. For the Psalmist goes on to say, For why? He remembered His holy promise, which He made to Abraham His servant Psalm 104:42. And He brought forth His people with joy, and His chosen with gladness Psalm 104:43.

What he said, His people, he has repeated in, His chosen. So also what he said, with joy, he has repeated in, with gladness. And gave them the lands of the heathen: and they took the labours of the people in possession Psalm 104:44. The lands of the heathen, and the labours of the people, are the same; and the words, He gave, are repeated in these, they took in possession.

33. ...That they may keep His statutes, and seek out His law Psalm 104:45. Lastly, since by the seed of Abraham he wished those to be understood here, who were truly the seed of Abraham, such as were not wanting even in that people; as the Apostle Paul clearly shows, when he says, But not in all of them was God well pleased; 1 Corinthians 10:5 for if He was not pleased with all, surely there were some in whom He was well pleased: since then this Psalm praises such men as this, he has said nothing here of the iniquities and provocations and bitterness of those with whom God was not well pleased. But since not only the justice but also the mercy of Almighty God, the merciful, was shown even unto the wicked; concerning these attributes the rest of the Psalm pursues the praises of God. And yet both sorts were in one people: nor did the latter pollute the good with the contagion of their iniquities. For the Lord knows who are His; 2 Timothy 2:19 and if he cannot separate in this world from wicked men, yet, let every one that names the name of Christ depart from iniquity....

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