

# Exposition on Psalm 109

by St. Augustine

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*Psalm 109 contains a prophecy of Christ's betrayal and the punishment of Judas for his unfaithfulness, emphasizing the importance of prayer and seeking justice and mercy from God.*

**Scripture:** Romans 3:4

**Topics:** "Christ's Suffering", "God's Mercy"

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## Description

St. Augustine delves into the Psalms, highlighting the prophetic nature of the text in relation to Judas, the betrayer of Christ, and the Jewish people who opposed Him. He emphasizes the consequences of betraying and slandering Christ, pointing out the importance of prayer and seeking God's mercy in times of need. St. Augustine reflects on the suffering and redemption of Christ, as well as the ultimate victory over persecutors through God's intervention and salvation.

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## Transcript

1. Every one who faithfully reads the Acts of the Apostles, acknowledges that this Psalm contains a prophecy of Christ; for it evidently appears that what is here written, let his days be few, and let another take his office, is prophesied of Judas, the betrayer of Christ...For as some things are said which seem peculiarly to apply to the Apostle Peter, and yet are not clear in their meaning, unless when referred to the Church, whom he is acknowledged to have figuratively represented, on account of the primacy which he bore among the Disciples; as it is written, I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, Matthew 16:19 and other passages of the like purport: so Judas does represent those Jews who were enemies of Christ, who both then hated Christ, and now, in their line of succession, this species of wickedness continuing, hate Him. Of these men, and of this people, not only may what we read more openly discovered in this Psalm be conveniently understood, but also those things which are more expressly stated concerning Judas himself.

2. The Psalm, then, begins thus: O God, be not silent as to my praise; for the mouth of the ungodly, yea, the mouth of the deceitful is opened upon me Psalm 108:1. Whence it appears, both that the blame, which the ungodly and the deceitful is not silent of, is false, and that the praise, which God is not silent of, is true. For God is true, but every man a liar; Romans 3:4 for no man is true, except him in whom God speaks. But the highest praise is that of the only-begotten Son of God, in which He is proclaimed even that which He is, the only-begotten Son of God. But this did not appear, but, when His weakness appeared, lay hid, when the mouth of the ungodly and deceitful was opened upon Him; and for this reason his mouth was

opened, because His virtue was concealed: and he says, the mouth of the deceitful was opened, because the hatred which was covered by deceit burst out into language.

3. They have spoken against me with false tongues Psalm 108:2: then chiefly when they praised him as a good Master with insidious adulation. Whence it is elsewhere said: and they that praised me, are sworn together against me. Next, because they burst into cries, Crucify Him, crucify Him; John 19:6 he has added, They compassed me about also with words of hatred. They who with a treacherous tongue spoke words seemingly of love, and not of hatred, against me, since they did this insidiously; afterwards compassed me about with words not of false and deceitful love, but of open hatred, and fought against me without a cause. For as the pious love Christ for nought, so do the wicked hate Him for nought; for as truth is earnestly sought by the best men on its own account, without any advantage, external to itself, in view, so is wickedness sought by the worst men. Whence among secular authors it is said of a very bad man, he was wicked and cruel for no object.

4. In place, says he, of loving me, they detracted from me Psalm 108:3. There are six different acts of this class, which may, when mentioned, very easily be borne in mind; (1) to return good for evil, (2) not to return evil for evil; (3) to return good for good, (4) to return evil for evil; (5) not to return good for good, (6) to return evil for good. The two first of these belong to the good, and the first of these two is the better; the two last belong to the wicked, and the latter of the two is the worse; the two middle to a sort of middle class of persons, but the first of these borders upon the good, the latter on the bad. We should remark these things in the holy Scriptures. Our Lord Himself returns good for evil, who justifies the ungodly; Romans 4:5 and who, when hanging upon the Cross, said, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. Luke 23:34 ...

5. But after he had said, in place of loving me, they detracted from me; what does he add? But I gave myself unto prayer. He said not indeed what he prayed, but what can we better understand than for them themselves? For they were detracting greatly from Him whom they crucified, when they ridiculed Him as if He were a man, whom in their opinion they had conquered; from which Cross He said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do; so that while they in the depth of their malignity were rendering evil for good, He in the height of His goodness was rendering good for evil....The divine words then teach us by our Lord's example, that when we feel others ungrateful to us, not only in that they do not repay us with good, but even return evil for good, we should pray; He indeed for others who were raging against Him, or in sorrow, or endangered in faith; but we for ourselves in the first place, that we may by the mercy and aid of God conquer our own mind, by which we are borne on to the desire of revenge, when any detraction is made from us, either in our presence or our absence....

6. He adds, Thus have they rewarded me evil for good Psalm 108:4. And as if we asked, what evil? For what good? And hatred, he says, for my good will. This is the sum total of their great guilt. For how could the persecutors injure Him who died of His own free-will, and not by compulsion? But this very hatred is the greatest crime of the persecutor, although it be the willing atonement of the sufferer. And he has sufficiently explained the sense of the above words, In place of loving me, since they owed love not as a general duty only, but in return for His love: in that he has here added, for my good will. This love He mentions in the Gospel, when He says, How often would I have gathered your children together, and you would not! Matthew 23:37

7. He then begins to prophesy what they should receive for this very impiety; detailing their lot in such a manner, as if he wished its realization from a desire of revenge. Some not understanding this mode of

predicting the future, under the appearance of wishing evil, suppose hatred to be returned for hatred, and an evil will for an evil will, since in truth it belongs to few to distinguish, in what way the punishment of the wicked pleases the accuser, who longs to satiate his enmity; and in how widely different a way it pleases the judge, who with a righteous mind punishes sins. For the former returns evil for evil: but the judge when he punishes does not return evil for evil, since he returns justice to the unjust; and what is just, is surely good. He therefore punishes not from delight in another's misery, which is evil for evil: but from love of justice, which is good for evil....

8. Set thou an ungodly man to be ruler over him; and let Satan stand at his right hand Psalm 108:5. Though the complaint had been before concerning many, the Psalm is now speaking of one....Since therefore he is here speaking of the traitor Judas, who, according to the Scripture in the Acts of the Apostles, was to be punished with the penalty due to him, Acts 1:20 what means, set thou an ungodly man over him, save him whom in the next verse he mentions by name, when he says, and let Satan stand at his right hand? He therefore who refused to be subject unto Christ, deserved this, that he should have the devil set over him, that is, that he should be subject unto the devil....For this reason also it is said of those who, preferring the pleasures of this world to God, styled the people blessed who have such and such things, their right hand is a right hand of iniquity.. ..

9. When sentence is given upon him, let him be condemned, and let his prayer be turned into sin Psalm 108:6. For prayer is not righteous except through Christ, whom he sold in his atrocious sin: but the prayer which is not made through Christ, not only cannot blot out sin, but is itself turned into sin. But it may be inquired on what occasion Judas could have so prayed, that his prayer was turned into sin. I suppose that before he betrayed the Lord, while he was thinking of betraying Him; for he could no longer pray through Christ. For after he betrayed Him, and repented of it, if he prayed through Christ, he would ask for pardon; if he asked for pardon, he would have hope; if he had hope, he would hope for mercy; if he hoped for mercy, he would not have hanged himself in despair....

10. Let his days be few Psalm 108:7. By his days, he meant the days of his apostleship, which were few; since before the Passion of our Lord, they were ended by his crime and death. And as if it were asked, What then shall become of that most sacred number twelve, within which our Lord willed, not without a meaning, to limit His twelve first Apostles? He at once adds, and let another take his office. As much as to say, let both himself be punished according to his desert, and let his number be filled up.

11. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow Psalm 108:8. After his death, both his children were fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children be vagabonds, and be carried away, and beg their bread Psalm 108:9. By vagabonds he means, uncertain whither to go, destitute of all help. Let them be driven from their habitations. He here explains what he had said above, Let them be carried away. How all this happened to his wife and children, the following verses explain.

12. Let the extortioner search out all his substance, and let the strangers spoil his labour Psalm 108:10. Let there be no man to help him Psalm 108:11: that is, to guard his posterity; wherefore follows, nor to have compassion on his fatherless children

13. But as even orphans may, without one to help them, and without a guardian, nevertheless increase amid trouble and want, and preserve their race by descent; he next says, Let his posterity be destroyed; and in the next generation let his name be clean put out Psalm 108:12: that is, let what has been generated by him generate no more, and quickly pass away.

14. But what is it that he next adds? Let the wickedness of his fathers be had in remembrance in the sight of the Lord, and let not the sin of his mother be done away Psalm 108:13. Is it to be understood, that even the sins of his fathers shall be visited upon him? For upon him they are not visited, who has been changed in Christ, and has ceased to be the child of the wicked, by not having imitated their conduct. Ezekiel 18:4, 20 ...And to these words, I will visit the sins of the fathers upon the children, Exodus 20:5 is added, who hate Me; that is, hate Me as their fathers hated Me: so that as the effect of imitating the good is that even their own sins are blotted out, so the imitation of the wicked causes men to suffer not their own deservings only, but those also of those whom they have imitated....

15. Let them always be against the Lord Psalm 108:14. Against the Lord, means in the Lord's sight: for other translators have rendered this line, let them be always in the sight of the Lord; while others have rendered it, let them be before the Lord always; as it is elsewhere said, You have set our misdeeds in Your sight. By always, he means that this great crime should be without pardon, both here, and in a future life. Let the memorial of them perish from off the earth: that is, of his father and of his mother. By memorial of them, he means, that which is preserved by successive generations: this he prophesied should perish from the earth, because both Judas himself, and his sons, who were the memorial of his father and mother, without any succeeding offspring, as it is said above, were consumed in the short space of one generation.. ..

16. And that, because he remembered not to act mercifully Psalm 108:15; either Judas, or the people itself. But remembered not is better understood of the people: for if they slew Christ, they might well remember the deed in penitence, and act mercifully towards His members, whom they most perseveringly persecuted. For this reason he says, but persecuted the poor man and the beggar Psalm 108:16. It may indeed be understood of Judas; for the Lord did not disdain to become poor, when He was rich, that we might be enriched by His poverty. 2 Corinthians 8:9 But how shall I understand the word beggar, save perhaps because He said to the Samaritan woman, Give me to drink, John 4:7 and on the Cross He said, I thirst. John 19:28 But as to what follows, I do not see how it can be understood of our Head Himself, that is, the Saviour of His own body, whom Judas persecuted. For after saying, He persecuted the poor man and the beggar: he adds, and to slay, that is, that he might slay Him, for some have so rendered it, Him that was pricked at the heart. This expression is not commonly used except of the stings of past sins in the sorrows of penitence; as it is said of those who, when they had heard the Apostles after our Lord's ascension, were pricked in heart, even they who had slain the Lord....

17. The Psalm then continues: His delight was in cursing, and it shall happen to him Psalm 108:17. Although Judas loved cursing, both in stealing from the money bag, and selling and betraying the Lord: nevertheless, that people more openly loved cursing, when they said, His blood be on us, and on our children. loved not blessing, therefore it shall be far from him. Such was Judas indeed, since he loved not Christ, in whom is everlasting blessing; but the Jewish people still more decidedly refused blessing, unto whom he who had been enlightened by the Lord said, Will ye also be His disciples? John 9:27 He clothed himself with cursing, like as with a raiment: either Judas, or that people. And it came into his bowels like water. Both without, then, and within; without, like a garment; within, like water: since he has come before the judgment-seat of Him who has power to destroy both body and soul in hell; Matthew 10:28 the body without, the soul within. And like oil into his bones. He shows that he works evil with delight, and stores up cursing for himself, that is, everlasting punishment; for blessing is eternal life. For at present evil deeds are his delight, flowing like water into his bowels, like oil into his bones; but it is styled cursing, because God has appointed torments for such men.

18. Let it be unto him as the cloak which covers him Psalm 108:18. Since he has before spoken of the cloak, why does he repeat it? When he said, He clothed himself with cursing as with a raiment; does the raiment with which he is covered differ from that with which he is clothed? For every man is clothed with his tunic, covered with his cloak; and what is this, save boasting in iniquity, even in the sight of men? and as the girdle, he says, that he is always girded withal. Men are girded chiefly that they may be better fit for toil, that they may not be hindered by the folds of their dress. He therefore girds himself with curses, who designs an evil which he has carefully contrived, not on a sudden impulse, and who learns in such a manner to do evil, that he is always ready to commit it.

19. This is the work of them that slander me before the Lord Psalm 108:19. He said not, their reward, but, their work: for it is clear that by the clothing, covering, water, oil, and girdle, he was describing the very works by which eternal curses are procured. It is not then one Judas, but many, of whom it is said, This is the work of them that slander me before the Lord. Although indeed the plural number might have been put for the singular; even as, when Herod died, it was said by the Angel, They are dead which sought the young Child's life. Matthew 2:20 But who slander Christ more before the Lord, than they who slander the very words of the Lord, by declaring that it is not He whom the Law of the Lord and His Prophets announced beforehand? And of those that speak evil against my soul: by denying that He, when He had willed, could have arisen: though He says, I have power to lay down My life, and I have power to take it again. John 10:18

20. But work Thou with me, O Lord God Psalm 108:20. Some have thought mercifully should be understood, some have actually added it; but the best copies have the words thus: But work Thou with me, O Lord God, for Your Name's sake. Whence a higher sense should not be passed over, supposing the Son to have thus addressed the Father, Deal Thou with Me, since the works of the Father and of the Son are the same. Where although we understand mercy--for these words follow, for sweet is Your mercy,-- because he said not, In me, or, over me; or anything of this sort: but, work Thou with Me; we rightly understand that the Father and Son together work mercifully towards the vessels of mercy. Romans 9:23 Work with me, may also be understood to mean, help me. We use this expression in our daily language, when we are speaking of anything which is in our favour; It works with us. For the Father aids the Son, as far as the Deity aids Man, on account of His having assumed the form of a servant, to which Man, God, and to which Form of a servant, the Lord too is Father. For in the form of God, the Son needs not aid, for He is equally all-powerful with the Father, on which account He also is the helper of men....And because when he had said, Work Thou with me, he added, for Your Name's sake, he has commended grace. For without previous deserving works, human nature was raised to such a height, that the whole in one, the Word and Flesh, that is, God and Man, was styled the Only-begotten Son of God. And this was done that that which had been lost might be sought by Him who had created it, through that which had not been lost; whence the following words, For Your mercy is sweet.

21. O deliver me, for I am needy and poor Psalm 108:21. Need and poverty is that weakness, through which He was crucified. 2 Corinthians 13:4 And my heart is disturbed within me. This alludes to those words which He spoke when His Passion was drawing near, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death. Matthew 26:38

22. I go hence like a shadow that declines Psalm 108:22. By this he signified death itself. For as night comes of the shadow's declining, so death comes of mortal flesh. And am driven away as the locusts. This I think would be more suitably understood of His members, that is, of His faithful disciples. That he might make it much plainer, he preferred writing locusts in the plural number: although many may be understood

where the singular number is used, as in that passage, He spoke, and the locust came; but it would have been more obscure. His disciples, then, were driven away, that is, were put to flight by persecutors, either the multitude of whom He wished to be signified by the word locusts, or their passing from one place to another.

23. My knees are weak through fasting Psalm 108:23. We read, that our Lord Christ underwent a fast of forty days: Matthew 4:2 but had fasting so great power over Him, that His knees were weakened? Or is this more suitably understood of His members, that is, of His saints? And my flesh is changed because of the oil; because of spiritual grace. Whence Christ was so called from the Greek word, *chrisma*, which signifies unction. But the flesh was changed through the oil, not for the worse, but for the better, that is, rising from the dishonour of death to the glory of immortality....His flesh was not yet changed. But whether the Holy Spirit be represented by water through the notion of ablution or irrigation, or by oil through that of exultation and the inflaming of charity; It does not differ from Itself, because Its types are different. For there is a great difference between the lion and the lamb, and yet Christ is represented by both....

24. I became also a reproach unto them Psalm 108:24: through the death of the Cross. For Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us. Galatians 3:13 They looked upon Me, and shook their heads. Because they beheld His crucifixion, without beholding His resurrection: they saw when His knees were weakened, they saw not when His flesh was changed.

25. Help me, O Lord my God: O save me according to Your mercy Psalm 108:25. This may be referred to the whole, both to the Head and to the body: to the Head, owing to His having taken the form of a servant; to the body, on account of the servants themselves. For He might even in them have said unto God, Help Me: and, O save Me: as in them He said unto Paul, Why do you persecute Me? Acts 9:4 The following words, according to Your mercy, describe grace given gratuitously, not according to the merit of works.

26. And let them know how that this is Your Hand, and that Thou, Lord, hast made it Psalm 108:26. He said, Let them know, of those for whom He even prayed while they were raging; for even those who afterwards believed in Him were among the crowd who shook their heads in mockery of Him. But let those who ascribe unto God the shape of the human body, learn in what sense God has a hand. Let us therefore understand, that the Hand of God means Christ: whence it is elsewhere said, Unto whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? Isaiah 53:1 ...

27. Though they curse, yet bless Thou Psalm 108:27. Vain therefore and false is the cursing of the sons of men, that have pleasure in vanity, and seek a lie; but when God blesses, He does what He says. Let them be confounded that rise up against me. For their imagining that they have some power against Me, is the reason that they rise up against Me; but when I shall have been exalted above the heavens, and My glory shall have commenced spreading over the whole earth, they shall be confounded. But Your servant shall rejoice: either on the right hand of the Father, or in His members when they rejoice, both in hope among temptations, and after temptations for evermore.

28. Let my slanderers be clothed with shame Psalm 108:28: that is, let it shame them to have slandered me. But this may also be understood as a blessing, in that they are amended. And let them cover themselves with their own confusion, as with a double cloak; for *diplois* is a double cloak; that is, let them be confounded both within and without: both before God and before men.

29. As for me, I will confess greatly unto the Lord with my mouth Psalm 108:29....Is He said to praise among the multitude because He is with His Church here even unto the end of the world; Matthew 28:20

so that we may understand by among the multitude, that He is honoured by this very multitude? For he is said to be in the midst, unto whom the chief honour is paid. But if the heart is, as it were, that which is mid-most of a man, no better construction can be put on this passage than this, I will praise Him in the hearts of many. For Christ dwells through faith in our hearts; Ephesians 3:17 and therefore he says, with my mouth, that is, with the mouth of my body, which is the Church.

30. For He stood at the right hand of the poor Psalm 108:30. It was said of Judas, Let Satan stand at his right hand; since he chose to increase his riches by selling Christ; but here the Lord stood at the right hand of the poor, that the Lord Himself might be the poor man's riches. He stood at the right hand of the poor, not to multiply the years of a life that one day must end, nor to increase his stores, nor to render him strong in the strength of the body, or secure for a time; but, he says, to save my soul from the persecutors. Now the soul is rendered safe from the persecutors, if we do not consent to them unto evil; but there is no such consent to them when the Lord stands at the right hand of the poor, that he may not give way through his very poverty, that is, weakness. This aid was given to the Body of Christ in the case of all the holy Martyrs.

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