

Exposition on Psalm 11

by St. Augustine

St. Augustine's exposition on Psalm 11 emphasizes unwavering trust in God amidst the challenges posed by heretics and the importance of unity within the Church.

Scripture: Psalm 10:1-2, Psalm 10:4-7, Isaiah 1:17, Matthew 7:16, John 14:27, 1 Corinthians 3:17

Topics: "Faith And Trust", "Church Persecution"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on Psalm 10, addressing the challenges faced by the Church against heretics who try to lure believers away by exaggerating sins within the Church and claiming to possess Christ. He emphasizes the importance of trusting in the Lord amidst these trials and not being swayed by false teachings. Augustine delves into the allegorical meanings of the moon symbolizing the Church, highlighting the spiritual and carnal aspects of the Church's brightness. He encourages believers to remain steadfast in their faith, trusting in God's protection and guidance.

Transcript

To the end, a psalm of David himself.

1. This title does not require a fresh consideration: for the meaning of, to the end, has already been sufficiently handled. Let us then look to the text itself of the Psalm, which to me appears to be sung against the heretics, who, by rehearsing and exaggerating the sins of many in the Church, as if either all or the majority among themselves were righteous, strive to turn and snatch us away from the breasts of the one True Mother Church: affirming that Christ is with them, and warning us as if with piety and earnestness, that by passing over to them we may go over to Christ, whom they falsely declare they have. Now it is known that in prophecy Christ, among the many names in which notice of Him is conveyed in allegory, is also called a mountain. We must accordingly answer these people, and say, I trust in the Lord: how say ye to my soul, Remove into the mountains as a sparrow? Psalm 10:1. I keep to one mountain wherein I trust, how say ye that I should pass over to you, as if there were many Christs? Or if through pride you say that you are mountains, I had indeed need to be a sparrow winged with the powers and commandments of God: but these very things hinder my flying to these mountains, and placing my trust in proud men. I have a house where I may rest, in that I trust in the Lord. For even the sparrow has found her a house, and, The Lord has become a refuge to the poor. Let us say then with all confidence, lest while we seek Christ among heretics we lose Him, In the Lord I trust: how say ye to my soul, Remove into the mountains as a sparrow?

2. For, lo, sinners have bent the bow, they have prepared their arrows in the quiver, that they may in the obscure moon shoot at the upright in heart Psalm 10:2. These be the terrors of those who threaten us as touching sinners, that we may pass over to them as the righteous. Lo, they say, the sinners have bent the bow: the Scriptures, I suppose, by carnal interpretation of which they emit envenomed sentences from them. They have prepared their arrows in the quiver: the same words, that is, which they will shoot out on the authority of Scripture, they have prepared in the secret place of the heart. That they may in the obscure moon shoot at the upright in heart: that when they see, from the Church's light being obscured by the multitude of the unlearned and the carnal, that they cannot be convicted, they may corrupt good manners by evil communications. 1 Corinthians 15:33 But against all these terrors we must say, In the Lord I trust.

3. Now I remember that I promised to consider in this Psalm with what suitableness the moon signifies the Church. There are two probable opinions concerning the moon: but of these which is the true, I suppose it either impossible or very difficult for a man to decide. For when we ask whence the moon has her light, some say that it is her own, but that of her globe half is bright, and half dark: and when she revolves in her own orbit, that part wherein she is bright gradually turns towards the earth, so as that it may be seen by us; and that therefore at first her appearance is as if she were horned....According to this opinion the moon in allegory signifies the Church, because in its spiritual part the Church is bright, but in its carnal part is dark: and sometimes the spiritual part is seen by good works, but sometimes it lies hid in the conscience, and is known to God alone, since in the body alone is it seen by men....But according to the other opinion also the moon is understood to be the Church, because she has no light of her own, but is lighted by the only-begotten Son of God, who in many places of holy Scripture is allegorically called the Sun. Whom certain heretics being ignorant of, and not able to discern Him, endeavour to turn away the minds of the simple to this corporeal and visible sun, which is the common light of the flesh of men and flies, and some they do pervert, who as long as they cannot behold with the mind the inner light of truth, will not be content with the simple Catholic faith; which is the only safety to babes, and by which milk alone they can arrive in assured strength at the firm support of more solid food. Whichever then of these two opinions be the true, the moon in allegory is fitly understood as the Church. Or if in such difficulties as these, troublesome rather than edifying, there be either no satisfaction or no leisure to exercise the mind, or if the mind itself be not capable of it, it is sufficient to regard the moon with ordinary eyes, and not to seek out obscure causes, but with all men to perceive her increasings and fulnesses and wanings; and if she wanes to the end that she may be renewed, even to this rude multitude she sets forth the image of the Church, in which the resurrection of the dead is believed.

4. Next we must enquire, what in this Psalm is meant by the obscure moon, in which sinners have prepared to shoot at the upright in heart? For not in one way only may the moon be said to be obscure: for when her monthly course is finished, and when her brightness is interrupted by a cloud, and when she is eclipsed at the full, the moon may be called obscure. It may then be understood first of the persecutors of the Martyrs, for that they wished in the obscure moon to shoot at the upright in heart; whether it be yet in the time of the Church's youth, because she had not yet shone forth in greatness on the earth, and conquered the darkness of heathen superstitions; or by the tongues of blasphemers and such as defame the Christian name, when the earth was as it were beclouded, the moon, that is, the Church, could not be clearly seen; or when by the slaughter of the Martyrs themselves and so great effusion of blood, as by that eclipse and obscuration, wherein the moon seems to exhibit a bloody face, the weak were deterred from the Christian name; in which terror sinners shot out words crafty and sacrilegious to pervert even the upright in heart. And secondly, it can be understood of these sinners, whom the Church contains, because

at that time, taking the opportunity of this moon's obscurity, they committed many crimes, which are now tauntingly objected to us by the heretics, whereas their founders are said to have been guilty of them. But howsoever that be which was done in the obscure moon, now that the Catholic name is spread and celebrated throughout the whole world, what concern of mine is it to be disturbed by things unknown? For in the Lord I trust; nor do I listen to them that say to my soul, Remove into the mountains as a sparrow. For, lo, sinners have bent the bow, that they may in the obscure moon shoot at the upright in heart. Or if the moon seem even now obscure to them, because they would make it uncertain which is the Catholic Church, and they strive to convict her by the sins of those many carnal men whom she contains; what concern is this to him, who says in truth, In the Lord I trust? By which word every one shows that he is himself wheat, and endures the chaff with patience unto the time of winnowing.

5. In the Lord, therefore, I trust. Let them fear who trust in man, and cannot deny that they are of man's party, by whose grey hairs they swear; and when in conversation it is demanded of them, of what communion they are, unless they say that they are of his party, they cannot be recognised....Or perhaps you will say that it is written, You shall know them by their works? Matthew 7:16 I see indeed marvellous works the daily violences of the Circumcelliones, with the bishops and presbyters for their leaders, flying about in every direction, and calling their terrible clubs Israels; which men now living daily see and feel. But for the times of Macarius, respecting which they raise an invidious cry, most men have not seen them, and no one sees them now: and any Catholic who saw them could say, if he wished to be a servant of God, In the Lord I trust....

6. Let the Catholic soul then say, In the Lord I trust; how say ye to my soul, Remove into the mountains as a sparrow? For, lo, the sinners have bent the bow, they have prepared their arrows in the quiver, that they may in the obscure moon shoot at the upright in heart: and from them let her turn her speech to the Lord and say, For they have destroyed what You have perfected Psalm 10:3. And this let her say not against these only, but against all heretics. For they have all, as far as in them lies, destroyed the praise which God has perfected out of the mouth of babes and sucklings, when they disturb the little ones with vain and scrupulous questions, and suffer them not to be nourished with the milk of faith. As if then it were said to this soul, why do they say to you, Remove into the mountains as a sparrow; why do they frighten you with sinners, who have bent the bow, to shoot in the obscure moon at the upright in heart? She answers, Therefore it is they frighten me, because they have destroyed what You have perfected. Where but in their conventicles, where they nourish not with milk, but kill with poison the babes and ignorant of the interior light. But what has the Just done? If Macarius, if C cilianus, offend you, what has Christ done to you, who said, My peace I give unto you, My peace I leave with you; John 14:27 which you with your abominable dissensions have violated? What has Christ done to you? Who with such exceeding patience endured His betrayer, as to give to him, as to the other Apostles, the first Eucharist consecrated with His own hands, and blessed with His own mouth. What has Christ done to you? Who sent this same betrayer, whom He called a devil, John 6:70 who before betraying the Lord could not show good faith even to the Lord's purse, John 12:6 with the other disciples to preach the kingdom of heaven; Matthew 10:5-7 that He might show that the gifts of God come to those that with faith receive them, though he, through whom they receive them, be such as Judas was.

7. The Lord is in His holy temple Psalm 10:4, yea in such wise as the Apostle says, For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. 1 Corinthians 3:17 Now if any man shall violate the temple of God, him shall God destroy. He violates the temple of God, who violates unity: for he holds not the head, from which the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies according to the working

after the measure of every part makes increase of the body to the edifying of itself in love. The Lord is in this His holy temple; which consists of His many members, fulfilling each his own separate duties, by love built up into one building. Which temple he violates, who for the sake of his own pre-eminence separates himself from the Catholic society. The Lord is in His holy temple; the Lord, His seat is in heaven. If you take heaven to be the just man, as you take the earth to be the sinner, to whom it was said, Earth you are, and unto earth shall you go; Genesis 3:19 the words, The Lord is in His holy temple you will understand to be repeated, while it is said, The Lord, His seat is in heaven.

8. His eyes look upon the poor. His to Whom the poor man has been left, and Who has been made a refuge to the poor. And therefore all the seditions and tumults within these nets, Matthew 13:47 until they be drawn to shore, concerning which heretics upbraid us to their own ruin and our correction, are caused by those men, who will not be Christ's poor. But do they turn away God's eyes from such as would be so? For His eyes look upon the poor. Is it to be feared lest, in the crowd of the rich, He may not be able to see the few poor, whom He brings up in safe keeping in the bosom of the Catholic Church? His eyelids question the sons of men. Here by that rule I would wish to take the sons of men of those that from old men have been regenerated by faith. For these, by certain obscure passages of Scripture, as it were the closed eyes of God, are exercised that they may seek: and again, by certain clear passages, as it were the open eyes of God, are enlightened that they may rejoice. And this frequent closing and opening in the holy Books are as it were the eyelids of God; which question, that is, which try the sons of men; who are neither wearied with the obscurity of the matter, but exercised; nor puffed up by knowledge, but confirmed.

9. The Lord questions the righteous and ungodly Psalm 10:5. Why then do we fear lest the ungodly should be any hurt to us, if so be they do with insincere heart share the sacraments with us, seeing that He questions the righteous and the ungodly. But whoso loves iniquity, hates his own soul: that is, not him who believes God, and puts not his hope in man, but only his own soul does the lover of iniquity hurt.

10. He shall rain snares upon the sinners Psalm 10:6. If by clouds are understood prophets generally, whether good or bad, who are also called false prophets: false prophets are so ordered by the Lord God, that by them He may rain snares upon sinners. Matthew 24:24 For no one, but the sinner, falls into a following of them, whether by way of preparation for the last punishment, if he shall choose to persevere in sin; or to dissuade from pride, if in time he shall come to seek God with a more sincere intent. But if by clouds are understood good and true prophets only; by these too it is clear that God rains snares upon sinners, although by them He waters also the godly unto fruitfulness. To some, says the Apostle, we are the savour of life unto life; to some the savour of death unto death. 2 Corinthians 2:16 For not prophets only, but all who with the word of God water souls, may be called clouds. Who when they are understood amiss, God rains snares upon sinners; but when they are understood aright, He makes the hearts of the godly and believing fruitful. As, for instance, the passage, and they two shall be in one flesh, Ephesians 5:31 if one interpret it with an eye to lust, He rains a snare upon the sinner. But if you understand it, as he who says, But I speak concerning Christ and the Church, Ephesians 5:32 He rains a shower on the fertile soil. Now both are effected by the same cloud, that is, holy Scripture. Again the Lord says, Not that which goes into your mouth defiles you, but that which comes out. Matthew 15:11 The sinner hears this, and makes ready his palate for gluttony: the righteous hears it, and is guarded against the superstitious distinction in meats. Here then also out of the same cloud of Scripture, according to the several desert of each, upon the sinner the rain of snares, upon the righteous the rain of fruitfulness, is poured.

11. Fire and brimstone and the blast of the tempest is the portion of their cup. This is their punishment and end, by whom the name of God is blasphemed; that first they should be wasted by the fire of their own

lusts, then by the ill savour of their evil deeds cast off from the company of the blessed, at last carried away and overwhelmed suffer penalties unspeakable. For this is the portion of their cup: as of the righteous, Your cup inebriating how excellent is it! For they shall be inebriated with the richness of Your house. Now I suppose a cup is mentioned for this reason, that we should not suppose that anything is done by God's providence, even in the very punishments of sinners, beyond moderation and measure. And therefore as if he were giving a reason why this should be, he added, For the Lord is righteous, and has loved righteousneses Psalm 10:7. The plural not without meaning, but only because he speaks of men, is as that righteousneses be understood to be used for righteous men. For in many righteous men there seem, so to say, to be righteousneses, whereas there is one only righteousness of God whereof they all participate. Like as when one face looks upon many mirrors, what in it is one only, is by those many mirrors reflected manifoldly. Wherefore he recurs to the singular, saying, His face has seen equity. Perhaps, His face has seen equity, is as if it were said, Equity has been seen in His face, that is, in knowledge of Him. For God's face is the power by which He is made known to them that are worthy. Or at least, His face has seen equity, because He does not allow Himself to be known by the evil, but by the good; and this is equity.

12. But if any one would understand the moon of the synagogue, let him refer the Psalm to the Lord's passion, and of the Jews say, For they have destroyed what You have perfected; and of the Lord Himself, But what has the Just done? whom they accused as the destroyer of the Law: whose precepts, by their corrupt living, and by despising them, and by setting up their own, they had destroyed, so that the Lord Himself may speak as Man, as He is wont, saying, In the Lord I trust; how say ye to my soul, Remove into the mountains as a sparrow? by reason, that is, of the fear of those who desire to apprehend and crucify Him. Since the interpretation is not unreasonable of sinners wishing to shoot at the upright in heart, that is, those who believed in Christ, in the obscure moon, that is, the Synagogue filled with sinners. To this too the words, The Lord is in His holy temple; the Lord, His seat is in heaven, are suitable; that is, the Word in Man, or the very Son of Man who is in heaven. John 3:13 His eyes look upon the poor; either on to Him whom He assumed as God, or for whom He suffered as Man. His eyelids question the sons of men. The closing and opening of the eyes, which is probably meant by the word eyelids, we may take to be His death and resurrection, whereby He tried the sons of men His disciples, terrified at His passion, and gladdened by the resurrection. The Lord questions the righteous and ungodly, even now from out of Heaven governing the Church. But whoso loves iniquity, hates his own soul. Why it is so, what follows teaches us. For He shall rain snares upon the sinners: which is to be taken according to the exposition above given, and so on with all the rest to the end of the Psalm.

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