

Exposition on Psalm 120

by St. Augustine

In Psalm 120, St. Augustine explores the theme of spiritual progress and the perils that come with it, emphasizing the importance of prayer and the love of God and neighbor.

Scripture: Psalm 119:1

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Christian Perseverance"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the Psalms, emphasizing the spiritual journey of ascent and descent symbolized by the degrees in Psalm 119. He highlights the challenges faced by Christians striving for spiritual growth, including opposition from adversaries and deceitful tongues that hinder progress. Augustine encourages believers to pray against these obstacles and arm themselves with God's word and examples of transformed lives to combat falsehood and discouragement. He reflects on the longing for a heavenly home free from wickedness and the struggles of the Church amidst darkness and light, urging a return to love and unity as essential for true peace and Christ-like living.

Transcript

1. The Psalm which we have just heard chanted, and have responded to with our voices, is short, and very profitable. You will not long toil in hearing, nor will you toil fruitlessly in working. For it is, according to the title prefixed to it, A song of degrees. Degrees are either of ascent or of descent. But degrees, as they are used in this Psalm, are of ascending...There are therefore both those who ascend and those who descend on that ladder. Genesis 28:12 Who are they that ascend? They who progress towards the understanding of things spiritual. Who are they that descend? They who, although, as far as men may, they enjoy the comprehension of things spiritual: nevertheless, descend unto the infants, to say to them such things as they can receive, so that, after being nourished with milk, they may become fitted and strong enough to take spiritual meat...

2. When therefore a man has commenced thus to order his ascent; to speak more plainly, when a Christian has begun to think of spiritual amendment, he begins to suffer the tongues of adversaries. Whoever has not yet suffered from them, has not yet made progress; whoever suffers them not, does not even endeavour to improve. Does he wish to know what we mean? Let him at the same time experience what is reported of us. Let him begin to improve, let him begin to wish to ascend, to wish to despise earthly, fragile, temporal objects, to hold worldly happiness for nothing, to think of God alone, not to rejoice in gain, not to pine at losses, to wish even to sell all his substance, and distribute it among the poor, and to

follow Christ; let us see how he suffers the tongues of detractors and of constant opponents, and-- a still greater peril-- of pretended counsellors, who lead him astray from salvation...He then, who will ascend, first of all prays God against these very tongues: for he says, When I was in trouble, I called on the Lord; and He heard me Psalm 119:1. Why did He hear him? That He might now place him at the steps of ascent.

3. Deliver my soul, O Lord, from unrighteous lips, and from a deceitful tongue Psalm 119:2. What is a deceitful tongue? A treacherous tongue, one that has the semblance of counsel, and the bane of real mischief. Such are those who say, And will you do this, that nobody does? Will you be the only Christian?...Some deter by dissuasion, others discourage yet more by their praise. For since such is the life that has for some time been diffused over the world, so great is the authority of Christ, that not even a pagan ventures to blame Christ. He who cannot be censured is read. They cannot contradict Christ, they cannot contradict the Gospel, Christ cannot be censured; the deceitful tongue turns itself to praise as an hindrance. If you praise, exhort. Why do you discourage with your praise?...You turn yourself to another mode of dissuasion, that by false praise you may turn me away from true praise; nay, that by praising Christ you may keep me away from Christ, saying, What is this? Behold these men have done this: thou, perhaps, will not be able: you begin to ascend, you fall. It seems to warn you: it is the serpent, it is the deceitful tongue, it has poison. Pray against it, if you wish to ascend.

4. And your Lord says unto you, What shall be given you, or what shall be set before you, against the deceitful tongue? Psalm 119:3. What shall be given you, that is, as a weapon to oppose to the deceitful tongue, to guard yourself against the deceitful tongue? Or what shall be set before you? He asks to try you: for He will answer His own question. For He answers following up his own inquiry, even sharp arrows of the Mighty One, with coals that desolate, or that lay waste Psalm 119:4. They that desolate, or that lay waste (for it is variously written in different copies), are the same, because by laying waste, as you may observe, they easily lead unto desolation. What are these coals? First, beloved brethren, understand what are arrows. The sharp arrows of the Mighty One, are the words of God...What then are the coals that lay waste? It is not enough to plead with words against a deceitful tongue and unrighteous lips: it is not enough to plead with words; we must plead with examples also...The word coals, then, is used to express the examples of many sinners converted to the Lord. Thou hear men wonder, and say, I knew that man, how addicted he was to drinking, what a villain, what a lover of the circus, or of the amphitheatre, what a cheat: now how he serves God, how innocent he has become! Wonder not; he is a live coal. You rejoice that he is alive, whom you were mourning as dead. But when you praise the living, if you know how to praise, apply him to the dead, that he may be inflamed; whosoever is still slow to follow God, apply to him the coal which was extinguished, and have the arrow of God's word, and the coal that lays waste, that you may meet the deceitful tongue and the lying lips.

5. Alas, that my sojourning has become far off! Psalm 119:5. It has departed far from You: my pilgrimage has become a far one. I have not yet reached that country, where I shall live with no wicked person; I have not yet reached that company of Angels, where I shall not fear offenses. But why am I not as yet there? Because sojourning is pilgrimage. He is called a sojourner who dwells in a foreign land, not in his own country. And when is it far off? Sometimes, my brethren, when a man goes abroad, he lives among better persons, than he would perhaps live with in his own country: but it is not thus, when we go afar from that heavenly Jerusalem. For a man changes his country, and this foreign sojourn is sometimes good for him; in travelling he finds faithful friends, whom he could not find in his own country. He had enemies, so that he was driven from his country; and when he travelled, he found what he had not in his country. Such is

not that country Jerusalem, where all are good: whoever travels away from thence, is among the evil; nor can he depart from the wicked, save when he shall return to the company of Angels, so as to be where he was before he travelled. There all are righteous and holy, who enjoy the word of God without reading, without letters: for what is written to us through pages, they perceive there through the Face of God. What a country! A great country indeed, and wretched are the wanderers from that country.

6. But what he says, My pilgrimage has been made distant, are the words of those, that is, of the Church herself, who toils on this earth. It is her voice, which cries out from the ends of the earth in another Psalm, saying, From the ends of the earth have I cried unto You... ..Where then does he groan, and among whom does he dwell? I have had my habitation among the tents of Kedar. Since this is a Hebrew word, beyond doubt you have not understood it. What means, I have had my habitation among the tents of Kedar? Kedar, as far as we remember of the interpretation of Hebrew words, signifies darkness. Kedar rendered into Latin is called tenebræ. Now ye know that Abraham had two sons, whom indeed the Apostle mentions, and declares them to have been types of the two covenants...Ishmael therefore was in darkness, Isaac in light. Whoever here also seek earthly felicity in the Church, from God, shall belong to Ishmael. These are the very persons who gainsay the spiritual ones who are progressing, and detract from them, and have deceitful tongues and unrighteous lips. Against these the Psalmist, when ascending, prayed, and hot coals that lay waste, and swift and sharp arrows of the Mighty One, were given him for his defence. For among these he still lives, until the whole floor be winnowed: he therefore said, I have dwelt among the tents of Kedar. The tents of Ishmael are called those of Kedar. Thus the book of Genesis has it: thus it has, that Kedar belongs unto Ishmael. Genesis 25:13 Isaac therefore is with Ishmael: that is, they who belong unto Isaac, live among those who belong unto Ishmael. Galatians 4:29 These wish to rise above, those wish to press them downwards: these wish to fly unto God, those endeavour to pluck their wings...

7. My soul has wandered much Psalm 119:6. Lest you should understand bodily wandering, he has said that the soul wandered. The body wanders in places, the soul wanders in its affections. If you love the earth, you wander from God: if you love God, you rise unto God. Let us be exercised in the love of God, and of our neighbour, that we may return unto charity. If we fall towards the earth, we wither and decay. But one descended unto this one who had fallen, in order that he might arise. Speaking of the time of his wandering, he said that he wandered in the tents of Kedar. Wherefore? Because my soul has wandered much. He wanders there where he ascends. He wanders not in the body, he rises not in the body. But wherein does he ascend? The ascent, he says, is in the heart.

8. With them that hated peace, I was peaceful Psalm 119:7. But howsoever ye may hear, most beloved brethren, you will not be able to prove how truly ye sing, unless you have begun to do that which you sing. How much soever I say this, in whatsoever ways I may expound it, in whatsoever words I may turn it, it enters not into the heart of him in whom its operation is not. Begin to act, and see what we speak. Then tears flow forth at each word, then the Psalm is sung, and the heart does what is sung in the Psalm...Who are they who hate peace? They who tear asunder unity. For had they not hated peace, they would have abode in unity. But they separated themselves, forsooth on this account, that they might be righteous, that they might not have the ungodly mixed with them. These words are either ours or theirs: decide whose. The Catholic Church says, Unity must not be lost, the Church of God must not be cut off. God will judge afterwards of the wicked and the good...This we also say: Love ye peace, love ye Christ. For if they love peace, they love Christ. When therefore we say, Love ye peace, we say this, Love ye Christ. Wherefore? For the Apostle says of Christ, He is our peace, who has made both one. Ephesians 2:14 If Christ is

therefore peace, because He has made both one: why have ye made two of one? How then are you peace-makers, if, when Christ makes one of two, you make two of one? But since we say these things, we are peace-makers with them that hate peace; and yet they who hate peace, when we spoke to them, made war on us for nought.

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