

Exposition on Psalm 122

by St. Augustine

St. Augustine's exposition on Psalm 122 emphasizes the contrast between earthly and heavenly love, urging believers to aspire towards the eternal Jerusalem through unity and charity.

Scripture: Psalm 121:2

Topics: "Heavenly Citizenship", "Spiritual Journey"

Description

St. Augustine preaches about the power of holy love that raises us to heavenly things and eternal pursuits, contrasting it with impure love that leads to perishable desires. He emphasizes the longing to ascend to the eternal Jerusalem, where our true citizenship lies with the Angels. Augustine reflects on the spiritual journey towards the heavenly Jerusalem, a city being built with Christ as its foundation, where believers are living stones forming a temple for God. He delves into the significance of standing in the courts of Jerusalem, symbolizing our desire to be among the righteous and to partake in the eternal peace and stability of God's city.

Transcript

1. As impure love inflames the mind, and summons the soul destined to perish to lust for earthly things, and to follow what is perishable, and precipitates it into lowest places, and sinks it into the abyss; so holy love raises us to heavenly things, and inflames us to what is eternal, and excites the soul to those things which do not pass away nor die, and from the abyss of hell raises it to heaven. Yet all love has a power of its own, nor can love in the soul of the lover be idle; it must needs draw it on. But do you wish to know of what sort love is? See where it leads...

2. This Psalm is a Song of degrees; as we have often said to you, for these degrees are not of descent, but of ascent. He therefore longs to ascend. And whither does he wish to ascend, save into heaven? What means, into heaven? Does he wish to ascend that he may be with the sun, moon, and stars? Far be it! But there is in heaven the eternal Jerusalem, where are our fellow citizens, the Angels: we are wanderers on earth from these our fellow citizens. We sigh in our pilgrimage; we shall rejoice in the city. But we find companions in this pilgrimage, who have already seen this city herself; who summon us to run towards her. At these he also rejoices, who says, I rejoiced in them who said unto me, We will go into the house of the Lord Psalm 121:1...

3. Our feet were standing in the courts of Jerusalem Psalm 121:2...Consider what you will be there; and although you are as yet on the road, place this before your eyes, as if you were already standing, as if you

were already rejoicing without ceasing among the Angels; as if that which is written were realized in you: Blessed are they that dwell in Your house; they will be always praising You. Our feet stood in the courts of Jerusalem. What Jerusalem? This earthly Jerusalem also is wont to be called by the name: though this Jerusalem is but the shadow of that. And what great thing is it to stand in this Jerusalem, since this Jerusalem has not been able to stand, but has been turned into a ruin? Does then the Holy Spirit pronounce this, out of the kindled heart of the loving Psalmist, as a great thing? Is not it that Jerusalem, unto whom the Lord said, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that killest the Prophets, etc. Matthew 23:37 What great thing then did he desire; to stand among those who slew the Prophets, and stoned them that were sent unto them? God forbid that he should think of that Jerusalem, who so loves, who so burns, who so longs to reach that Jerusalem, our Mother, Galatians 4:26 of which the Apostle says, that She is eternal in the Heavens. 2 Corinthians 5:1

4. Jerusalem that is being built as a city Psalm 121:3. Brethren, when David was uttering these words, that city had been finished, it was not being built. It is some city he speaks of, therefore, which is now being built, unto which living stones run in faith, of whom Peter says, You also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house; 1 Peter 2:5 that is, the holy temple of God. What means, you are built up as lively stones? You live, if you believe, but if you believe, you are made a temple of God; for the Apostle Paul says, The temple of God is holy, which temple are you. 1 Corinthians 3:17 This city is therefore now in building; stones are cut down from the hills by the hands of those who preach truth, they are squared that they may enter into an everlasting structure. There are still many stones in the hands of the Builder: let them not fall from His hands, that they may be built perfect into the structure of the temple. This, then, is the Jerusalem that is being built as a city: Christ is its foundation. The Apostle Paul says, Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Christ Jesus. 1 Corinthians 3:11 When a foundation is laid on earth, the walls are built above, and the weight of the walls tends towards the lowest parts, because the foundation is laid at the bottom. But if our foundation be in heaven, let us be built towards heaven. Bodies have built the edifice of this basilica, the ample size of which you see; and since bodies have built it, they placed the foundation lowest: but since we are spiritually built, our foundation is placed at the highest point. Let us therefore run there, where we may be built...But what Jerusalem do I speak of? Is it that, he asks, which you see standing, raised on the structure of its walls? No; but the Jerusalem which is being built as a city. Why not, a city, instead of, as a city; save because those walls, so built in Jerusalem, were a visible city, as it is by all called a city, literally; but this is being built as a city, for they who enter it are like living stones; for they are not literally stones? Just as they are called stones, and yet are not so: so the city styled as a city, is not a city; for he said, is being built. For by the word building, he meant to be understood the structure, and cohesion of bodies and walls. For a city is properly understood of the men that inhabit there. But in saying is building, he showed us that he meant a town. And since a spiritual building has some resemblance to a bodily building, therefore it is building as a city.

5. But let the following words remove all doubt that we ought not to understand carnally the words, Whose partaking is in the same... ..What means, the same? What is ever in the same state; not what is now in one state, now in another. What then is, the same, save that which is? What is that which is? That which is everlasting...Behold The Same: I Am that I Am, I AM. You can not understand; it is much to understand, it is much to apprehend. Remember what He, whom you can not comprehend, became for you. Remember the flesh of Christ, towards which you were raised when sick, and when left half dead from the wounds of robbers, that you might be brought to the Inn, and there might be cured. Let us therefore run unto the Lord's house, and reach the city where our feet may stand; the city that is building as a city: whose partaking is in The Same....

6. That city which partakes in the same, partakes in its stability: justly therefore, since he is made a sharer in its stability, says he who runs there. For all things there stand where nought passes by. Do you too wish to stand there and not to pass by? Run there. Nobody has the same from himself...

7. For there the tribes went up Psalm 121:4. We were asking whither he ascends who has fallen; for we said, it is the voice of a man who is ascending, of the Church rising. Can we tell whither it ascends? Whither it goes? Whither it is raised? Thither, he says, the tribes went up. Whither? To partaking in the Same. But what are the tribes? Many know, many know not. For if we use the word curies in its proper sense, we understand nothing, save the curies which exist in each particular city, whence the terms curiales and decuriones, that is, the citizens of a curia or a decuria; and you know that each city has such curies. But there are, or were at one time, curies of the people in those cities, and one city has many curies, as Rome has thirty-five curies of the people. These are called tribes. The people of Israel had twelve of these, according to the sons of Jacob.

8. There were twelve tribes of the people of Israel: but there were good, and there were bad among them. For how evil were those tribes which crucified our Lord! How good those who recognised the Lord! Those tribes then who crucified the Lord, were tribes of the devil. When therefore he here said, For there the tribes go up; that you might not understand all the tribes, he added, even the tribes of the Lord....What are the tribes of the Lord? A testimony unto Israel. Hear, brethren, what this means. A testimony to Israel: that is, whereby it may be known that it is truly Israel...He is such in whom there is no guile. And what did the Lord say, when He saw Nathanael? Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile. John 1:47 If therefore he is a true Israelite, in whom there is no guile, those tribes go up to Jerusalem, in whom there is no guile....Wherefore do they go up? To confess unto Your Name, O Lord. It could not be more nobly expressed. As pride presumes, so does humility confess. As he is a presumer, who wishes to appear what he is not, so is he a confessor, who does not wish that to be seen which himself is, and loves That which He is. To this therefore do Israelites go up, in whom is no guile, because they are truly Israelites, because in them is the testimony of Israel.

9. For there were seated seats for judgment Psalm 121:5. This is a wonderful riddle, a wonderful question, if it be not understood. He calls those seats, which the Greeks call thrones. The Greeks call chairs thrones, as a term of honour. Therefore, my brethren, it is not wonderful if even we should sit on seats, or chairs; but that these seats themselves should sit, when shall we be able to understand this? As if some one should say: let stools or chairs sit here. We sit on chairs, we sit on seats, we sit on stools; the seats themselves sit not. What then means this, For there were seated seats for judgment?...If therefore heaven be the seat of God, and the Apostles are heaven; they themselves have become the seat of God, the throne of God. It is said in another passage: The soul of the righteous is the throne of wisdom. A great truth, a great truth, is declared; the throne of wisdom is the soul of the righteous; that is, wisdom sits in the soul of the righteous as it were in her chair, in her throne, and thence judges whatsoever she judges. There were therefore thrones of wisdom, and therefore the Lord said unto them, You shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Matthew 19:28 So they also shall sit upon twelve seats, and they are themselves the seats of God; for of them it is said, For there were seated seats. Who sat? Seats. And who are the seats? They of whom it is said, The soul of the righteous is the seat of wisdom. Who are the seats? The heavens. Who are the heavens? Heaven. What is heaven? That of which the Lord says, Heaven is My seat. Isaiah 66:1 The righteous then themselves are the seats; and have seats; and seats shall be seated in that Jerusalem. For what purpose? For judgment. You shall sit, He says, on twelve thrones, O you thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Judging whom? Those who are below on earth.

Who will judge? They who have become heaven. But they who shall be judged, will be divided into two bodies: one will be on the right hand, the other on the left...

10. He at once adds, as unto the seats themselves, Enquire ye the things that are for the peace of Jerusalem Psalm 121:6. O you seats, who now sit unto judgment, and are made the seats of the Lord who judges (since they who judge, enquire; they who are judged, are enquired of), Enquire ye, he says, the things that are for the peace of Jerusalem. What will they find by asking? That some have done deeds of charity, that others have not. Those whom they shall find to have done deeds of charity, they will summon them unto Jerusalem; for these deeds are for the peace of Jerusalem. Love is a powerful thing, my brethren, love is a powerful thing. Do ye wish to see how powerful a thing love is?...If charity be destitute of means, so that it cannot find what to bestow upon the poor, let it love: let it give one cup of cold water; Matthew 10:42 as much shall be laid to its account, as to Zaccheus who gave half his patrimony to the poor. Luke 19:8 Wherefore this? The one gave so little, the other so much, and shall so much be imputed to the former? Just so much. For though his resources are unequal, his charity is not unequal.

11. ...And plenteousness, he adds, for them that love you. He addresses Jerusalem herself, They have plenteousness who love her. Plenteousness after want: here they are destitute, there they are affluent; here they are weak, there they are strong; here they want, there they are rich. How have they become rich? Because they gave here what they received from God for a season, and received there what God will afterwards pay back for evermore. Here, my brethren, even rich men are poor. It is a good thing for a rich man to acknowledge himself poor: for if he think himself full, that is mere puffing, not plenteousness. Let him own himself empty, that he may be filled. What has he? Gold. What has he not yet? Everlasting life. Let him consider what he has, and see what he has not. Brethren, of that which he has, let him give, that he may receive what he has not; let him purchase out of that which he has, that which he has not, and plenteousness for them that love you.

12. Peace be in your strength Psalm 121:7. O Jerusalem, O city, who art being built as a city, whose partaking is in The Same: Peace be in your strength: peace be in your love; for your strength is your love. Hear the Song of songs: Love is strong as death. Song of Songs 8:6 A great saying that, brethren, Love is strong as death. The strength of charity could not be expressed in grander terms than these, Love is strong as death. For who resists death, my brethren? Consider, my brethren. Fire, waves, the sword, are resisted: we resist principalities, we resist kings; death comes alone, who resists it? There is nought more powerful than it. Charity therefore is compared with its strength, in the words, Love is strong as death. And since this love slays what we have been, that we may be what we were not; love creates a sort of death in us. This death he had died who said, The world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world: Galatians 6:14 this death they had died unto whom he said, You are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. Colossians 3:3 Love is strong as death...

13. Thus as he was here speaking of charity, he adds, For my brethren and companions' sake, I spoke peace of you Psalm 121:8. O Jerusalem, thou city whose partaking is in The Same, I in this life and on this earth, I poor, he says, I a stranger and groaning, not as yet enjoying to the full your peace, and preaching your peace; preach it not for my own sake, as the heretics, who seeking their own glory, say, Peace be with you: and have not the peace which they preach to the people. For if they had peace, they would not tear asunder unity. I, he says, spoke peace of you. But wherefore? For my brethren and companions' sake: not for my own honour, not for my own money, not for my life; for, To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But, I spoke peace of you, for my brethren and companions' sakes. For he wished to depart, and to be with Christ: but, since he must preach these things to his companions and his brethren, to abide in

the flesh, he adds, is more needful for you.

14. Because of the house of the Lord my God, I have sought good things for you Psalm 121:9. Not on my own account have sought good things, for then I should not seek for you, but for myself; and so should I not have them, because I should not seek them for you; but, Because of the house of the Lord my God, because of the Church, because of the Saints, because of the pilgrims; because of the poor, that they may go up; because we say to them, we will go into the house of the Lord: because of the house of the Lord my God itself, I have sought good things for You. These long and needful words gather ye, brethren, eat them, drink them, and grow strong, run, and seize.

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