

Exposition on Psalm 123

by St. Augustine

A Christian's heart is heavy because he is a pilgrim, longing for his country and the happiness promised by Christ, and he should desire true wealth and righteousness, understanding himself to be destitute and in want.

Scripture: Psalm 122:2

Topics: "Heavenly Citizenship", "Spiritual Ascent"

Description

St. Augustine preaches about the longing of a Christian's heart for their heavenly home, despite worldly prosperity, emphasizing the pilgrimage-like journey of believers and their desire for the promised happiness in Christ. He discusses the spiritual ascent towards God, cautioning against pride and the importance of fixing one's eyes on the heavenly righteousness. Augustine highlights the concept of heaven as the dwelling place of God within holy and righteous souls, urging believers to purge sin and strive to become a heavenly abode. He addresses the mockery and contempt faced by those who seek spiritual fulfillment over earthly pleasures, emphasizing the true wealth of righteousness and the eternal riches found in God's presence.

Transcript

1. ...Let this singer ascend; and let this man sing from the heart of each of you, and let each of you be this man, for when each of you says this, since you are all one in Christ, one man says this; and says not, Unto You, O Lord, have we lift up our eyes; but, Unto You, O Lord, have I lift up my eyes Psalm 122:1. You ought indeed to imagine that every one of you is speaking; but that One in a special sense speaks, who is also spread abroad over the whole world...

What makes the heart of a Christian heavy? Because he is a pilgrim, and longs for his country. If your heart be heavy on this score, although you have been prosperous in the world, still thou dost groan: and if all things combine to render you prosperous, and this world smile upon you on every side, thou nevertheless groanest, because you see that you are set in a pilgrimage; and feelest that you have indeed happiness in the eyes of fools, but not as yet after the promise of Christ: this you seek with groans, this you seek with longings, and by longing ascendest, and while you ascend dost sing the Song of Degrees.

2. ...Where then are the ladders? For we behold so great an interval between heaven and earth, there is so wide a separation, and so great a space of regions between: we wish to climb there, we see no ladder; do we deceive ourselves, because we sing the Song of Degrees, that is, the Song of ascent? We ascend unto heaven, if we think of God, who has made ascending steps in the heart. What is to ascend in heart?

To advance towards God. As every man who fails, does not descend, but falls: so every one who profits does ascend: but if he so profit, as to avoid pride: if he so ascend as not to fall: but if while he profits he become proud, in ascending he again falls. But that he may not be proud, what ought he to do? Let him lift up his eyes unto Him who dwells in heaven, let him not heed himself...

3. If, my brethren, we understand by heaven the firmament which we see with our bodily eyes, we shall indeed so err, as to imagine that we cannot ascend there without ladders, or some scaling machines: but if we ascend spiritually, we ought to understand heaven spiritually: if the ascent be in affection, heaven is in righteousness. What is then the heaven of God? All holy souls, all righteous souls. For the Apostles also, although they were on earth in the flesh, were heaven; for the Lord, enthroned in them, traversed the whole world. He then dwells in heaven. How?...How long are they the temple according to faith? As long as Christ dwells in them through faith; as the Apostle says, That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. But they are already heaven in whom God already dwells visibly, who see Him face to face; all the holy Apostles, all the holy Virtues, Powers, Thrones, Lordships, that heavenly Jerusalem, wanderers from whence we groan, and for which we pray with longing; and there God dwells. Thither has the Psalmist lifted up his faith, there he rises in affection, with longing hopes: and this very longing causes the soul to purge off the filth of sins, and to be cleansed from every stain, that itself also may become heaven; because it has lifted up its eyes unto Him who dwells in heaven. For if we have determined that that heaven which we see with our bodily eyes is the dwelling of God, the dwelling of God will pass away; for heaven and earth will pass away. Matthew 24:35 Then, before God created heaven and earth, where did He dwell? But some one says: and before God made the Saints, where did He dwell? God dwelt in Himself, he dwelt with Himself, and God is with Himself. And when He deigns to dwell in the Saints, the Saints are not the house of God in such wise, as that God should fall when it is withdrawn. For we dwell in a house in one way, in another way God dwells in the Saints. You dwell in a house: if it be withdrawn, you fall, but God so dwells in the Saints, that if He should Himself depart, they fall...

4. What then follows, since he has said, Unto You do I lift up my eyes? Psalm 122:2. How have you lifted up your eyes? Behold, even as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress: even so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until He have mercy upon us. We are both servants, and a handmaiden: He is both our Master and our Mistress. What do these words mean? What do these similitudes mean? It is not wonderful if we are servants, and He our Master; but it is wonderful if we are a maiden, and He our Mistress. But not even our being a maiden is wonderful; for we are the Church: nor is it wonderful that He is our Mistress; for He is the Power and the Wisdom of God...When therefore you hear Christ, lift up your eyes to the hands of your Master; when you hear the Power of God and the Wisdom of God, lift up your eyes to the hands of your Mistress; for you are both servant and handmaiden; servant, for you are a people; handmaiden, for you are the Church. But this maiden has found great dignity with God; she has been made a wife. But until she come unto those spiritual embraces, where she may without apprehension enjoy Him whom she has loved, and for whom she has sighed in this tedious pilgrimage, she is betrothed: and has received a mighty pledge, the blood of the Spouse for whom she sighs without fear. Nor is it said unto her, Do not love; as it is sometimes said to any betrothed virgin, not as yet married: and is justly said, Do not love; when you have become a wife, then love: it is rightly said, because it is a precipitate and preposterous thing, and not a chaste desire, to love one whom she knows not whether she shall marry. For it may happen that one man may be betrothed to her, and another man marry her. But as there is no one else who can be preferred to Christ, let her love without apprehension: and before she is joined unto Him, let her love, and sigh from a distance and from her far pilgrimage...

5. For we have been much filled with contempt Psalm 122:3. All that will live piously according to Christ, must needs suffer reproof, 2 Timothy 3:12 must needs be despised by those who do not choose to live piously, all whose happiness is earthly. They are derided who call that happiness which they cannot see with their eyes, and it is said to them, What do you believe, madman? Do you see what you believe? Hath any one returned from the world below, and reported to you what is going on there? Behold I see and enjoy what I love. You are scorned, because thou dost hope for what you see not; and he who seems to hold what he sees, scorns you. Consider well if he does really hold it...I have my house, he has boasted himself. Thou ask, what house of his own? That which my father left me. And whence did he derive this house? My grandfather left it him. Go back even to his great grandfather, then to his great grandfather's father, and he can no longer tell their names. Are you not rather terrified by this thought, that you see many have passed through this house, and that none of them has carried it away with him to his everlasting home? Your father left it: he passed through it: thus thou also wilt pass by. If therefore you have a mere passing stay in your house, it is an inn for passing guests, not an habitation for permanent abode. Yet since we hope for those things which are to come, and sigh for future happiness, and since it has not yet appeared what we shall be, although we are already sons of God; 1 John 3:2 for our life is hidden with Christ in God: Colossians 3:3 we are utterly despised, by those who seek or enjoy happiness in this world.

6. Our soul is filled exceedingly; a reproach to the wealthy, and a contempt to the proud Psalm 122:4. We were asking who were the wealthy: he has expounded to you, in that he has said, the proud. Reproach and contempt are the same: and wealthy is the same with proud. It is a repetition of the sentence, a reproach to the wealthy, and a contempt to the proud. Why are the proud wealthy? Because they wish to be happy here. Why? Since they themselves too are miserable, are they wealthy? But perhaps when they are miserable, they do not mock us. Listen, my beloved. Then perchance they mock when they are happy, when they boast themselves in the pomp of their riches! When they boast themselves in the inflated state of false honours: then they mock us, and seem to say, Behold, it is well with me: I enjoy the good things before me: let those who promise what they cannot show depart from me: what I see, I hold; what I see, I enjoy; may I fare well in this life. Be thou more secure; for Christ has risen again, and has taught you what He will give in another life: be assured that He gives it. But that man mocks you, because he holds what he has. Bear with his mockeries, and you will laugh at his groans: for afterwards there will come a season when these very persons will say, This was he whom we had sometimes in derision. Wisdom 5:3 ...

7. To this we must add, that sometimes those also who are beneath the scourge of temporal unhappiness, mock us...Did not the robber Luke 23:39 mock, who was crucified with our crucified Lord? If therefore they who are not wealthy mock us, why does the Psalm say, A reproach to the wealthy? If we carefully sift the matter, even these (the unfortunate) are wealthy. How are they wealthy? Yea; for if they were not wealthy, they would not be proud. For one man is wealthy in money, and proud on that score: another is wealthy in honours, and is proud on that account: another imagines himself wealthy in righteousness, and hence his pride, which is worse. They who seem not to be wealthy in money, seem to themselves to be wealthy in righteousness towards God; and when calamity overtakes them, they justify themselves, accuse God, and say, What wrong have I been guilty of, or, what have I done? Thou repliest: Look back, call to mind your sins, see if you have done nothing. He is somewhat touched in conscience, and returns to himself, and thinks of his evil deeds; and when he has thought of his evil deeds, not even then does he choose to confess that he deserves his sufferings; but says, Behold, I have clearly done many things; but I see that many have done worse, and suffer no evil. He is righteous against God. He also therefore is wealthy: he has his breast puffed out with righteousness; since God seems to him to do ill, and he seems to himself to

suffer unjustly. And if you gave him a vessel to pilot, he would be shipwrecked with it: yet he wishes to deprive God of the government of this world, and himself to hold the helm of Creation, and to distribute among all men pains and pleasures, punishments and rewards. Miserable soul! Yet why do ye wonder? He is wealthy, but wealthy in iniquity, wealthy in malignity; but is more wealthy in iniquity, in proportion as he seems to himself to be wealthy in righteousness.

8. But a Christian ought not to be wealthy, but ought to acknowledge himself poor; and if he has riches, he ought to know that they are not true riches, so that he may desire others...And what is the wealth of our righteousness? How much soever righteousness there may be in us, it is a sort of dew compared to that fountain: compared to that plenteousness it is as a few drops, which may soften our life, and relax our hard iniquity. Let us only desire to be filled with the full fountain of righteousness, let us long to be filled with that abundant richness, of which it is said in the Psalm, They shall be satisfied with the plenteousness of Your house: and You shall give them drink out of the torrent of Your pleasure. But while we are here, let us understand ourselves to be destitute and in want; not only in respect of those riches which are not the true riches, but of salvation itself. And when we are whole, let us understand that we are weak. For as long as this body hungers and thirsts, as long as this body is weary with watching, weary with standing, weary with walking, weary with sitting, weary with eating; wherever it turns itself for a relief from weariness, there it discovers another source of fatigue: there is therefore no perfect soundness, not even in the body itself. Those riches are then not riches, but beggary; for the more they abound, the more does destitution and avarice increase...Let then our whole hunger, our whole thirst, be for true riches, and true health, and true righteousness. What are true riches? That heavenly abode in Jerusalem. For who is called rich on this earth? When a rich man is praised, what is meant? He is very rich: nothing is wanting to him. That surely is the praise of him that praises the other: for it is not this, when it is said, He wants nothing. Consider if he really want nothing. If he desires nothing, he wants nothing: but if he still desires more than what he has, his riches have increased in such wise, that his wants have increased also. But in that City there will be true riches, because there will be nothing wanting to us there; for we shall not be in need of anything, and there will be true health...

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