

Exposition on Psalm 127

by St. Augustine

The sermon emphasizes the importance of humility, the role of the Church and its guardians, and the hope of the faithful in the resurrection.

Scripture: Psalm 126:1, Psalm 126:3, Proverbs 8:3, John 10:9, 1 Corinthians 15:51, Ephesians 2:14

Topics: "Church Growth", "Spiritual Birth"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the significance of the Psalms, particularly Psalm 126, highlighting the allegorical interpretation of Solomon as a representation of Christ, the True Peacemaker. He emphasizes the importance of God's role in building His house and the Church, underscoring the need for humility and reliance on God's guidance. St. Augustine delves into the concept of rising before dawn symbolizing arrogance and the necessity of waiting for Christ's light. He also discusses the resurrection of the dead and the Church as the mother of believers, emphasizing the spiritual birth and growth of God's people.

Transcript

1. Among all the Songs entitled the Song of degrees, this Psalm has a further addition in the title, that it is Solomon's. For thus it is entitled, A Song of degrees of Solomon. It has therefore aroused our attention, and caused us to enquire the reason of this addition, of Solomon. For it is needless to repeat explanations of the other words, Song of degrees....Solomon was in his time David's son, a great man, through whom many holy precepts and healthful admonitions and divine mysteries have been wrought by the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures. Solomon himself was a lover of women, and was rejected by God: and this lust was so great a snare unto him, that he was induced by women even to sacrifice to idols, 1 Kings 11:7-8 as Scripture witnesses concerning him. But if, by his fall what was delivered through him were blotted out, it would be judged that he had himself delivered these precepts, and not that they were delivered through him. The mercy of God, therefore, and His Spirit, excellently wrought that whatever of good was declared through Solomon, might be attributed unto God; and the man's sin, unto the man. What marvel that Solomon fell among God's people? Did not Adam fall in Paradise? Did not an angel fall from heaven, and become the devil? We are thereby taught, that no hope must be placed in any among men....The name of Solomon is interpreted to mean peacemaker: now Christ is the True Peacemaker, of whom the Apostle says, He is our Peace, who has made both one. Ephesians 2:14 ...Since, therefore, He is the true Solomon; for that Solomon was the figure of this Peace maker, when he built the temple; that you may not think he who built the house unto God was the true Solomon, Scripture showing unto you another Solomon, thus commences this Psalm: Except the Lord build the house, their labour is but lost that build it

Psalm 126:1. The Lord, therefore, builds the house, the Lord Jesus Christ builds His own house. Many toil in building: but, except He build, their labour is but lost that build it. Who are they who toil in building it? All who preach the word of God in the Church, the ministers of God's mysteries. We are all running, we are all toiling, we are all building now; and before us others have run, toiled, and built: but except the Lord build, their labour is but lost. Thus the Apostles seeing some fall bewailed these men, in that they had laboured in vain for them. Galatians 4:10-11 We, therefore, speak without, He builds within. We can observe with what attention ye hear us; He alone who knows your thoughts, knows what ye think. He Himself builds, He Himself admonishes, He Himself opens the understanding, He Himself kindles your understanding unto faith; nevertheless, we also toil like workmen; but, except the Lord build, etc.

2. But that which is the house of God is also a city. For the house of God is the people of God; for the house of God is the temple of God....This is Jerusalem: she has guards: as she has builders, labouring at her building up, so also has she guards. To this guardianship these words of the Apostle relate: I fear, lest by any means your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity which is in Christ. 2 Corinthians 11:3 He was guarding the Church. He kept watch, to the utmost of his power, over those over whom he was set. The Bishops also do this. For a higher place was for this reason given the Bishops, that they might be themselves the superintendents and as it were the guardians of the people. For the Greek word Episcopus, and the vernacular Superintendent, are the same; for the Bishop superintends, in that he looks over. As a higher place is assigned to the vinedresser in the charge of the vineyard, so also to the Bishops a more exalted station is allotted. And a perilous account is rendered of this high station, except we stand here with a heart that causes us to stand beneath your feet in humility, and pray for you, that He who knows your minds may be Himself your keeper. Since we can see you both coming in and going out; but we are so unable to see what are the thoughts of your hearts, that we cannot even see what ye do in your houses. How then can we guard you? As men: as far as we are able, as far as we have received power. And because we guard you like men, and cannot guard you perfectly, shall you therefore remain without a keeper? Far be it! For where is He of whom it is said, Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman wakes but in vain? Psalm 126:1. We are watchful on our guard, but vain in our watchfulness, except He who sees your thoughts guard you. He keeps guard while you are awake, He keeps guard also while you are asleep. For He has once slept on the Cross, and has risen again; He no longer sleeps. Be Israel: for the Keeper of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers. Yea, brethren, if we wish to be kept beneath the shadow of God's wings, let us be Israel. For we guard you in our office of stewards; but we wish to be guarded together with you. We are as it were shepherds unto you; but beneath that Shepherd we are fellow-sheep with you. We are as it were your teachers from this station; but beneath Him, the One Master, we are schoolfellows with you in this school.

3. If we wish to be guarded by Him who was humbled for our sakes, and who was exalted to keep us, let us be humble. Let no one assume anything unto himself. No man has any good, except he has received it from Him who alone is good. But he who chooses to arrogate wisdom unto himself, is a fool. Let him be humble, that wisdom may come, and may enlighten him. But if, before wisdom comes unto him, he imagine that he is wise; he rises before light, and walks in darkness. What does he hear in this Psalm? It is but lost labour that you haste to rise up before dawn Psalm 126:2. What means this? If you arise before light arises, you must needs lose your labour, because ye will be in the dark. Our light, Christ, has arisen; it is good for you to rise after Christ, not to rise before Christ. Who rise before Christ? They who choose to prefer themselves to Christ. And who are they who wish to prefer themselves to Christ? They who wish to be exalted here, where He was humble. Let them, therefore, be humble here, if they wish to be exalted there, where Christ is exalted....The Lord recalled the sons of Zebedee to humility, and said unto them,

Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of? Matthew 20:21-22 I came to be humble: and are you wishing to be exalted before Me? The way I go, do ye follow, He says. For if you choose to go this way where I do not go, your labour is lost, in rising before dawn. Peter too had risen before the light, when he wished to give the Lord advice, deterring Him from suffering for us....But what did our Lord do? He caused him to rise after the Light: Get behind Me, Satan. Matthew 16:23 He was Satan, because he wished to rise before Light. Get behind Me: that I may precede, you may follow: where I go, there you may go; and may not wish to lead Me, where you would go....

4. And as if you should say, When shall we rise? We are ordered now to sit: when will be our rising? When the Lord's was. Look unto Him, who went before you: for if you heed not Him, it is lost labour for you to rise before dawn. When was He raised? When He had died. Hope therefore for your uplifting after your death: have hope in the resurrection of the dead, because He rose again and ascended. But where did He sleep? On the Cross. When He slept on the Cross, He bore a sign, yea, He fulfilled what had been signified in Adam: for when Adam was asleep, a rib was drawn from him and Eve was created; Genesis 2:21-22 so also while the Lord slept on the Cross, His side was transfixed with a spear, and the Sacraments flowed forth, John 19:34 whence the Church was born. For the Church the Lord's Bride was created from His side, as Eve was created from the side of Adam. But as she was made from his side no otherwise than while sleeping, so the Church was created from His side no otherwise than while dying. If therefore He rose not from the dead save when He had died, do you hope for exaltation save after this life? But that this Psalm might teach you, in case you should ask, When shall I rise? Perhaps before I have sat down? He adds, When He has given His beloved sleep Psalm 126:3. God gives this when His beloved have fallen asleep; then His beloved, that is, Christ's, shall rise. For all indeed shall rise, but not as His beloved. There is a resurrection of all the dead; but what says the Apostle? We shall all rise, but we shall not all be changed. 1 Corinthians 15:51 They rise unto punishment: we rise as our Lord rose, that we may follow our Head, if we are members of Him....Hope for such a resurrection; and for the sake of this be a Christian, not for the sake of this world's happiness. For if you wish to be a Christian for the sake of this world's happiness, since He your Light sought not worldly happiness; you are wishing to rise before the light; you must needs continue in darkness. Be changed, follow your Light; rise where He rose again: first sit down, and thus rise, when He gives His beloved sleep.

5. As if you should ask again, who are the beloved? Lo, children, the reward of the fruit of the womb, are an heritage of the Lord Psalm 126:3. Since he says, fruit of the womb, these children have been born in travail. There is a certain woman, in whom what was said unto Eve, in sorrow shall you bring forth children, is shown after a spiritual manner. The Church bears children, the Bride of Christ; and if she bears them, she travails of them. In figure of her, Eve was called also the Mother of all living. He who said, My little children, of whom I travail in birth again, until Christ be formed in you, Galatians 4:19 was among the members of her who travails. But she travailed not in vain, nor brought forth in vain: there will be a holy seed at the resurrection of the dead: the righteous who are at present scattered over the whole world shall abound. The Church groans for them, the Church travails of them; but in that resurrection of the dead, the offspring of the Church shall appear, pain and groaning shall pass away....

6. Like as the arrows in the hand of the mighty one, even so are the children of those that are shot out Psalm 126:4. Whence has sprung this heritage, brethren? Whence has sprung so numerous a heritage? Some have been shot out from the Lord's hand, as arrows, and have gone far, and have filled the whole earth, whence the Saints spring. For this is the heritage whereof it is said, Desire of Me, and I shall give you the heathen for your inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for your possession. And how

does this possession extend and increase unto the world's uttermost parts? Because, like as the arrows in the hand of the mighty one, etc. Arrows are shot forth from the bow, and the stronger the arm which has sent it forth, the farther flies the arrow. But what is stronger than the darting of the Lord? From His bow He sends forth His Apostles: there could not be a spot left where an arrow shot by so strong an arm would not reach; it has reached unto the uttermost parts of the earth. The reason it went no farther was, that there were no more of the human race beyond. For He has such strength, that even if there were a spot beyond, whither the arrow could fly, He would dart the arrow there. Such are the children of those who are shot forth as they that are shot forth.. ..

7. Perhaps the Apostles themselves are styled the sons of those who have been shaken out, the sons of the Prophets. For the Prophets comprised closed and covered mysteries: they were shaken, that they might come forth thence manifestly....Except the prophecy involved were sifted with diligence, would the concealed meanings come forth unto us? All these meanings were therefore closed before the Lord's advent. The Lord came, and shook out these hidden meanings, and they were made manifest; the Prophets were shaken out, and the Apostles were born. Since then they were born of the Prophets who had been shaken out, the Apostles are sons of those that were shaken out. They, placed as the arrows in the hand of the giant, have reached the uttermost parts of the earth....The Apostles the sons of the Prophets have been like as the arrows in the hand of a mighty one. If He is mighty, He has shaken them out with a mighty hand; if He has shaken them out with a mighty hand, they whom He has shaken forth have arrived even at the uttermost parts of the earth.

8. Blessed is the man who has filled his desire from them Psalm 126:5. Well, my brethren, who fills his desire from them? Who loves not the world. He who is filled with the desire of the world, has no room for that to enter which they have preached. Pour forth what you carry, and become fit for that which you have not. That is, you desire riches: you can not fill your desire from them: you desire honours upon earth, you desire those things which God has given even unto beasts of burden, that is, temporal pleasure, bodily health, and the like; you will not fulfil your desire from them....He shall not be ashamed, when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. Brethren, let us speak in the gate, that is, let all know what we speak. For he who chooses not to speak in the gate, wishes what he speaks to be hidden, and perhaps wishes it to be hidden for this reason, that it is evil. If he be confident, let him speak in the gate; as it is said of Wisdom, She cries at the gates, at the entry of the city. Proverbs 8:3 As long as they hold unto righteousness in innocency, they shall not be ashamed: this is to preach at the gate. And who is he who preaches at the gate? He who preaches in Christ; because Christ is the gate whereby we enter into that city. John 10:9 ...They, therefore, who speak against Christ, are without the gate; because they seek their own honours, not those of Christ. But he who preaches in the gate, seeks Christ's honour, not his own: and, therefore, he who preaches in the gate, says, Trust not in me; for you will not enter through me, but through the gate. While they who wish men to trust in themselves, wish them not to enter through the gate: it is no marvel if the gate be closed against them, and if they vainly knock for it to be opened.

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