

Exposition on Psalm 138

by St. Augustine

This sermon is an exposition of Psalm 138, where David expresses his praise and thanksgiving to God, and encourages others to do the same, by confessing to God's Name in His mercy and His truth, and by singing in the paths of the Lord.

Scripture: Psalm 137:1, Psalm 137:3, Acts 17:27, Romans 4:25, Romans 12:19, 1 Corinthians 3:17, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Worship And Praise", "Faith And Humility"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the Psalms, highlighting the importance of confession not only of sin but also of praise to God. He emphasizes the need for heartfelt worship and thanksgiving, directing attention to the inner voice that God hears. Augustine delves into the significance of singing before the Angels, worshiping towards God's holy Temple, and confessing to God's Name in mercy and truth. He explores the themes of humility, seeking God's presence, and trusting in God's mercy and everlasting love, encouraging believers to walk in faith even amidst tribulations.

Transcript

1. The title of this Psalm is brief and simple, and need not detain us; since we know whose resemblance David wore, and since in him we recognise ourselves also, for we too are members of that Body. The whole title is, To David himself. Let us see then, what is to David himself. The title of the Psalm is wont to tell us what is treated of within it: but in this, since the title informs us not of this, but tells us only to Whom it is chanted, the first verse tells us what is treated of in the whole Psalm, I will confess to You. This confession then let us hear. But first I remind you, that the term confession in Scripture, when we speak of confession to God, is used in two senses, of sin, and of praise. But confession of sin all know, confession of praise few attend to. So well known is confession of sin, that, wherever in Scripture we hear the words, I will confess to You, O Lord, or, we will confess to You, immediately, through habitually understanding in this way, our hands hurry to beating our breast: so entirely are men wont not to understand confession to be of anything, save of sin. But was then our Lord Jesus Christ Himself too a sinner, who says in the Gospel, I confess to You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth? He goes on to say what He confesses, that we might understand His confession to be of praise, not of sin, I confess to You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. He praised the Father, he praised God, because He despises not the humble, but the proud. And such confession are we now going to hear, of praise of God, of thanksgiving. With my whole heart. My whole heart I lay upon the altar of Your praise, an whole burnt-offering of praise I offer to You....I will

confess to You, O Lord, with my whole heart: for You have heard the words of my mouth Psalm 137:1. What mouth, save my heart? For there have we the voice which God hears, which ear of man knows not at all. We have then a mouth within, there do we ask, thence do we ask, and if we have prepared a lodging or an house for God, there do we speak, there are we heard. For He is not far from every one of us, for in Him we live, and move, and have our being. Acts 17:27-28 Nought makes you far off from God, save sin only. Cast down the middle wall of sin, and you are with Him whom you ask.

2. And before the Angels will I sing unto You. Not before men will I sing, but before the Angels. My song is my joy; but my joy in things below is before men, my joy in things above before the Angels. For the wicked knows not the joy of the just: There is no joy, says my God, to the wicked. The wicked rejoices in his tavern, the martyr in his chain. In what did that holy Crispina rejoice, whose festival is kept today? She rejoiced when she was being seized, when she was being carried before the judge, when she was being put into prison, when she was being brought forth bound, when she was being lifted up on the scaffold, when she was being heard, when she was being condemned: in all these things she rejoiced; and the wretches thought her wretched, when she was rejoicing before the Angels.

3. I will worship toward Your holy Temple Psalm 137:2. What holy Temple? That where we shall dwell, where we shall worship. For we hasten that we may adore. Our heart is pregnant and comes to the birth, and seeks where it may bring forth. What is the place where God is to be worshipped?...The Temple of God is holy, says the Apostle, which Temple you are. 1 Corinthians 3:17 But assuredly, as is manifest, God dwells in the Angels. Therefore when our joy, being in spiritual things, not in earthly, takes up a song to God, to sing before the Angels, that very assembly of Angels is the Temple of God, we worship toward God's Temple. There is a Church below, there is a Church above also; the Church below, in all the faithful; the Church above, in all the Angels. But the God of Angels came down to the Church below, and Angels ministered to Him on earth, Matthew 4:11 while He ministered to us; for, I came not, says He, to be ministered unto, but to minister. Matthew 20:28 ...The Lord of Angels died for man. Therefore, I will worship toward Your holy Temple; I mean, not the temple made with hands, but that which You have made for Yourself.

4. And I will confess to Your Name in Your mercy and Your truth....These also which You have given to me, do I according to my power give to You in return: mercy, in aiding others; truth, in judging. By these God aids us, by these we win God's favour. Rightly, therefore, All the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth. No other ways are there whereby He can come to us, no other whereby we can come to Him. For You have magnified Your holy Name over everything. What sort of thanksgiving is this, brethren? He has magnified His holy Name over Abraham. Of Abraham was born Isaac; over that house God was magnified; then Jacob; God was magnified, who said, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Then came his twelve sons. The name of the Lord was magnified over Israel. Then came the Virgin Mary. Then Christ our Lord, dying for our sins, rising again for our justification, Romans 4:25 filling the faithful with His Holy Spirit, sending forth men to proclaim throughout the Gentiles, Repent ye, etc. Matthew 3:2 Behold, He has magnified His holy Name above all things.

5. In what day soever I call upon You, do Thou quickly hear me Psalm 137:3. Wherefore, quickly? Because You have said, While yet you are speaking I will say, Lo, here I am. Isaiah 58:9 Wherefore, quickly? Because now I seek not earthly happiness, I have learned holy longings from the New Testament. I seek not earth, nor earthly abundance, nor temporal health, nor the overthrow of my enemies, nor riches, nor rank: nought of these do I seek: therefore quickly hear me. Since You have taught me what to seek, grant what I seek....

6. Let us see then what he seeks, with what right he has said, quickly hear me. For what do you seek, that you should quickly be heard? You shall multiply me. In many ways may multiplication be understood....For men are multiplied in their soul with cares: a man seems to be multiplied in soul, in whom vices even are multiplied. That is the multiplication of want, not of fullness. What then do you desire, thou who hast said, quickly hear me, and hast withdrawn yourself entirely from the body, from every earthly thing, from every earthly desire, so as to say to God, You shall multiply me in my soul? Explain yet further what you desire. You shall multiply me, says he, in my soul with virtue....

7. Let all the kings of the earth confess to You, O Lord Psalm 137:4. So shall it be, and so it is, and that daily; and it is shown that it was not said in vain, save that it was future. But neither let them, when they confess to You, when they praise You, desire earthly things of You. For what shall the kings of the earth desire? Have they not already sovereignty? Whatever more a man desire on earth, sovereignty is the highest point of his desire. What more can he desire? It must needs be some loftier eminence. But perhaps the loftier it is, the more dangerous. And therefore the more exalted kings are in earthly eminence, the more ought they to humble themselves before God. What do they do? Because they have heard all the words of Your mouth. In a certain nation were hidden the Law and the Prophets, all the words of Your mouth: in the Jewish nation alone were all the words of Your mouth, the nation which the Apostle praises, saying, What advantage has the Jew? Much every way; chiefly because that unto them were committed the oracles of God. These were the words of God. Romans 3:1-2 ...What meant Gideon's fleece? It is like the nation of the Jews in the midst of the world, which had the grace of sacraments, not indeed openly manifested, but hidden in a cloud, or in a veil, like the dew in the fleece. Judges 6:37, 39 The time came when the dew was to be manifested in the floor; it was manifested, no longer hidden. Christ alone is the sweetness of dew: Him alone you recognise not in Scripture, for whom Scripture was written. But yet, they have heard all the words of your mouth.

8. And let them sing in the paths of the Lord, that great is the glory of the Lord Psalm 137:5. Let all the kings of the earth sing in the paths of the Lord. In what paths? Those that are spoken of above, in Your mercy and Your truth. Let not then the kings of the earth be proud, let them be humble. Then let them sing in the ways of the Lord, if they be humble: let them love, and they shall sing. We know travellers that sing; they sing, and hasten to reach the end of their journey. There are evil songs, such as belong to the old man; to the new man belongs a new song. Let then the kings of the earth too walk in Your paths, let them walk and sing in Your paths. Sing what? That great is the glory of the Lord, not of kings.

9. See how he willed that kings should sing on their way, humbly bearing the Lord, not lifting themselves up against the Lord. For if they lift themselves up, what follows? For the Lord is high, and has respect unto the lowly Psalm 137:6. Do kings then desire that He have respect unto them? Let them be humble. What then? If they lift themselves up to pride, can they escape His eyes? Lest perchance, because you have heard, He has respect unto the lowly, thou choose to be proud, and say in your soul, God has respect unto the lowly, He has not respect unto me, I will do what I will. O foolish one! Would you say this, if you knew what you ought to love? Behold, even if God wills not to see you, do you not fear this very thing, that He wills not to see you?...The lofty then, it seems, He has not respect unto, for it is the lowly He respects. The lofty-- what? He considers from afar. What then gains the proud? To be seen from afar, not to escape being seen. And think not that you must needs be safe on that account, for that He sees less clearly, who sees you from afar. For thou indeed see not clearly, what you see from afar; God, although He see you from afar, sees you perfectly, yet is He not with you. This you gain, not that you are less perfectly seen, but that you are not with Him by whom you are seen. But what does the lowly gain? The Lord is near unto

them that are of a contrite heart. Let the proud then lift himself up as much as he will, certainly God dwells on high, God is in heaven: do you wish that He come near to you? Humble yourself. For the higher will He be above you, the more you lift yourself up.

10. If I walk in the midst of tribulation, You shall revive me Psalm 137:7. True it is: whatsoever tribulation you are in, confess, call on Him; He frees you, He revives you....Love the other life, and you shall see that this life is tribulation, whatever prosperity it shine with, whatever delights it abound and overflow with; since not yet have we that joy most safe and free from all temptation, which God reserves for us in the end, without doubt it is tribulation. Let us understand then what tribulation he means here too, brethren. Not as though he said, If perchance there shall any tribulation have befallen me, You shall free me therefrom. But how says he? If I walk, etc.; that is, otherwise You will not revive me, unless I walk in the midst of tribulation.

11. You have stretched forth Your hand over the wrath of mine enemies, and Your right hand has made me safe. Let mine enemies rage: what can they do? They can take my money, strip, proscribe, banish me; afflict me with grief and tortures; at last, if they be allowed, even kill me: can they do anything more? But over that which mine enemies can do, You have stretched forth Your hand. For mine enemies cannot separate me from You: but You avenge me the more, the more Thou as yet delayest....Yet not to make me despair; for it follows, and Your right hand has made me safe.

12. You, Lord, shall recompense for me Psalm 137:8. I recompense not: You shall recompense. Let mine enemies rage their full: You shall recompense what I cannot....Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, says the Apostle, but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord. Romans 12:19 There is here another sense not to be neglected, perhaps even to be preferred. Lord Christ, You shall repay for me. For I, if I repay, have seized; You have paid what You have not seized. Lord, You shall repay for me. Behold Him repaying for us. They came to Him, who exacted tribute: Matthew 17:24-26 they used to demand as tribute a didrachma, that is, two drachmas for one man; they came to the Lord to pay tribute; or rather, not to Him, but to His disciples, and they said to them, Does not your Master pay tribute? They came and told Him. He says unto Peter, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first comes up: and when you have opened his mouth, you shall find a stater: that take, and give for Me and you. The first that rises from the sea, is the First-begotten from the dead. In His mouth we find two didrachmas, that is, four drachmas: in His mouth we find the four Gospels. By those four drachmas we are free from the claims of this world, by the four Evangelists we remain no longer debtors; for there the debt of all our sins is paid. He then has repaid for us, thanks to His mercy. He owed nothing: He repaid not for Himself: He repaid for us....

13. Lord, Your mercy is for everlasting....Not for a time only do I desire to be freed. Your mercy is for everlasting, wherewith You have freed the martyrs, and so hast quickly taken them from this life. Despise not Thou the works of Your own hands. I say not, Lord, despise not the works of my hands: of my own works I boast not. I sought, indeed, the Lord with my hands in the night season before Him, and have not been deceived; but yet I praise not the works of my own hands; I fear lest, when You shall look into them, Thou find more sins in them than deserts. Behold in me Your Work, not mine: for mine if You see, You condemn; Yours, if You see, You crown. For whatever good works there be of mine, from You are they to me; and so they are more Yours than mine. Ephesians 2:8-10 Therefore whether in regard that we are men, or in regard that we have been changed and justified from our iniquity, Lord, despise not Thou the works of Your own hands.

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