

Exposition on Psalm 140

by St. Augustine

St. Augustine's exposition on Psalm 140 highlights the need for divine deliverance from wickedness and the assurance of God's protection for the faithful.

Scripture: Matthew 5:6

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Christian Perseverance"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the Psalms, emphasizing the Church of Christ's prayers amidst the wicked, the need to focus on Christ as the ultimate end, and the importance of seeking deliverance from the wicked and unrighteous. He highlights the dangers of hidden sins and the deceitful nature of the unrighteous, urging believers to pray for protection and endurance in the face of temptations. St. Augustine encourages believers to seek God's strength, protection, and salvation in the midst of trials, acknowledging the constant battle against evil and the need for God's grace and guidance.

Transcript

1. Our Lords have bidden me, brethren, and in them the Lord of all, to bring this Psalm to your understanding, so far as God gives me to. May He help your prayers, that I may say those things which I ought to say, you to hear, that to all of us the Word of God may be profitable. For all it does not profit, for all have not faith. 1 Thessalonians 3:2 ...
2. What this Psalm contains, I believe that you perceived when it was being chanted; for therein the Church of Christ, set in the midst of the wicked, complains and groans, and pours out prayer to God. For her voice is in every such prophecy the voice of one in need and want, not yet satisfied, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, Matthew 5:6 for whom a certain fullness in the end has been promised, and is reserved....
3. To the end, a Psalm to David himself. No other end may thou look to, than is laid down for you by the Apostle himself. For Christ is the end. Romans 10:4 ...He was of the seed of David, not after His Godhead, whereby He is the Creator of David, but after the flesh; therefore He deigned to be called David in prophecy: look to this end, for the Psalm is chanted to David Himself; hear the voice of His Body; be in His Body. Let the voice which you have heard be yours, and pray, and say what follows.
4. Deliver me, O Lord, from the wicked man Psalm 139:1. Not from one only, but from the class; not from the vessels only, but from their prince himself, that is, the devil. Why from man, if he means from the devil?

Because he too is called a man in a figure. Matthew 13:24-28 ...Now then being made light, not in ourselves, but in the Lord, Ephesians 5:8 let us pray not only against darkness, that is, against sinners, whom still the devil possesses, but also against their prince, the devil himself, who works in the children of disobedience. Deliver me from the unrighteous man. The same as from the wicked man. For he called him wicked because unrighteous, lest perchance you should think that any unrighteous man could be a good man. For many unrighteous men seem to be harmless; they are not fierce, are not savage, do not persecute nor oppress; yet are they unrighteous, because, following some other habit, they are luxurious, drunkards, given to pleasure...Wicked then is every unrighteous man, who must needs be harmful, whether he be gentle or fierce. Whoever falls in his way, whoever is taken by his snares, will find how harmful is that which he thought harmless. For, brethren, even thorns prick not with their roots. Pull up thorns from the ground, handle their roots, and see whether you feel pain. Yet that in the upgrowth which causes you pain, proceeded from that root. Let not then men please you who seem gentle and kind, yet are lovers of carnal pleasure, followers of polluted lusts, let them not please you. Though as yet they seem gentle, they are roots of thorns....And so, my brethren, body of Christ, members of Christ groaning among such wicked men, whomsoever ye find hurrying headlong into evil lusts and deadly pleasures, at once chide, at once punish, at once burn. Let the root be burnt, and there remains not whence the thorn may grow up. If you cannot, be sure that you will have them as enemies. They may be silent, they may hide their enmity, but they cannot love you. But since they cannot love you, and since they who hate you must needs seek your harm, let not your tongue and heart be slow to say to God, Deliver me, O Lord, from the unrighteous man.

5. Who have imagined unrighteousnesses in their heart Psalm 139:2....From them free me, from them let Your hand be most powerful to deliver me. For easy is it to avoid open enmities, easy is it to turn aside from an enemy declared and manifest, while iniquity is in his lips as well as his heart; he is a troublesome enemy, he is secret, he is with difficulty avoided, who bears good things in his lips, while in his heart he conceals evil things. All the day long did they make war. What is, war? They made for me what I was to fight against all the day. For from thence, from such hearts as these, arises all that the Christian fights against. Be it sedition, be it schism, be it heresy, be it turbulent opposition, it springs not save from these imaginings which were concealed, and while they spoke good words with their lips, all the day long did they make war. You hear words of peace, yet making war departs not from their thoughts. For the words, all the day long, signify without intermission, throughout the whole time. They have sharpened their tongues like serpents Psalm 139:3. If still you seek to make out the man, behold a comparison. In the serpent above all beasts is there cunning and craft to hurt; for therefore does it creep. It has not even feet, so that its footsteps when it comes may be heard. In its progress it draws itself, as it were, gently along, yet not straightly. Thus then do they creep and crawl to hurt, having poison hidden even under a gentle touch. And so it follows, the poison of asps is under their lips. Behold, it is under their lips, that we may perceive one thing under their lips, another in their lips....

6. Preserve me, O Lord, from the hand of the sinner, from unrighteous men deliver me Psalm 139:4. Here they wear their real colours, they are known; here we have no need to understand, but to act: we have need to pray, not to ask who they are. But how you should pray against such men, he explains in what follows. For many pray unskilfully against wicked men. Who have imagined, says he, to trip up my steps. Thus far it may be understood carnally. Every one has enemies, who seek to cheat him in trade, to rob him of money, where they are engaged together in business; every one has some neighbour his enemy, who devises how to bring mischief upon his family, to injure in some way his property and surely he devises this by deceit, by fraud, by devilish devices he endeavours to accomplish this: no one can doubt it. Yet not

for these reasons are they to be guarded against, but lest they lay in wait for you and draw you to themselves, that is, separate you from the Body of Christ, and make you of their body. For as Christ is the Head of the good, so is the devil their head. What is, to trip up my steps? Not as though you should be deceived in the business you have with him, or he cheat you in a case which you have with him in the law courts. He has tripped up your steps, if he have hindered you in the way of God; so that what you directed aright may stumble, or fall from the way, or fall in the way, or draw back from the way, or stop on the way, or go back to the place from whence it had come. Whatsoever has done this to you, has tripped you up, has deceived you. Against such snares as these pray thou, lest you lose your heavenly inheritance, lest you lose Christ your Joint-heir, for you are destined to live for ever with Him, who has made you an heir. For you are made an heir, not by one whom you are to succeed after his death, but One together with whom you are to live for ever.

7. The proud have hidden a trap for me Psalm 139:5. He has briefly described the whole body of the devil, when he says, the proud. Hence is it that for the most part they call themselves righteous when they are unrighteous. Hence is it that nothing is so grievous to them as to confess their sins. They are men who, being falsely righteous, must needs envy the truly righteous. For none envies another in that which he wishes not either to be or to seem....Hence come all allurings and trippings up of others. This the devil first wished, when falling himself he envied man who stood....

8. But those proud ones have hidden a trap for me; they have sought to trip up my steps. And what have they done? And have stretched out cords as traps. What cords? The word is well known in holy Scripture, and elsewhere we find what cords signify. For each one is holden with the cords of his sins, Proverbs 5:22 says Scripture. And Esaias says openly, Woe to them that draw sin like a long rope. Isaiah 5:18 And why is it called a cord? Because every sinner who perseveres in his sins, adds sin to sin; and when he ought by accusing his sins to amend, by defending he doubles what by confession he might have removed, and often seeks to fortify himself by other sins, on account of the sins he has already committed....But these their sins they spread for the righteous, when they persuade them to do the evils which they themselves do. Therefore he said, they spread cords and traps; that is, by their sins they desired to overthrow me. And where did they this? Beside the paths have they laid a stumbling-block for me: not in the paths, but, beside the paths. Your paths are the commandments of God. They have laid stumbling-blocks beside the paths; do not thou withdraw out of the paths, and you will not rush upon stumbling-blocks. Yet will I not that you should say, God should prevent them from laying stumbling-blocks beside my paths, and then they would not lay them. Nay, rather, God permitted them to lay stumbling-blocks beside your paths, that you should not leave the paths.

9. And what remains? What remedy amid such ills, in such temptations, such dangers? I said unto the Lord, You are my God Psalm 139:6. Loud is the voice of prayer, it excites confidence. Is He not the God of the others? Of whom is not He God, who is the true God? Yet is He specially theirs, who enjoy Him, who serve Him, who willingly submit to Him. For the wicked too, though unwillingly, are subject to Him....Hear with Your ears the voice of my prayer. He did not say, Hear with Your ears my prayer; but, as though expressing more plainly the affection of his heart, the voice of my prayer, the life of my prayer, the soul of my prayer, not that which sounds in my words, but that which gives life to my words. For all other noises without life may be called sounds, but not words. Words belong to those that have souls, to the living. But how many pray to God, yet have neither perception of God, nor right thoughts concerning God! These may have the sound of prayer, the voice they cannot, for there is no life in them. This was the voice of the prayer of one who was alive, forasmuch as he understood that God was his God, saw by Whom he was

freed, perceived from whom he was freed.

10. Commending this to the ears of God, let him say, Lord, Lord. Thou Lord-Lord, that is, most truly Lord, not like the lords-men, not like the lords who buy with money-bags, but the Lord who buys with His Blood. Lord, Lord, Thou strength of my health Psalm 139:7, that is, who givest strength to my health. What is the meaning of strength of my health? He complained of the stumbling-blocks and snares of sinners, of wicked men, vessels of the devil, that barked around him and laid snares around him, of the proud that envy the righteous. But He immediately added a comfort, He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. This he observed and feared, and, distressed at the abundance of iniquities, turned himself to hope. Verily I shall be saved, if I endure unto the end: but endurance, so as to win salvation, pertains unto strength; You are the strength of my salvation; You make me to endure, that I may attain salvation....Toiling then in this warfare, he looked back to the grace of God; and because already he had begun to be heated and parched, he found, as it were, a shade, whereunder to live. You have overshadowed my head in the day of battle: that is, in the heat, lest I be heated, lest I be parched.

11. Deliver me not over, O Lord, by my own longing to the sinner Psalm 139:8. Behold to what end Your overshadowing shall avail for me, that I suffer not heat from myself. And what could that sinner do to me, rage as he would? For wicked men raged against the martyrs, dragged them away, bound them with chains, shut them up in prisons, slew them with the sword, exposed them to wild beasts, consumed them with fire: all this they did; yet did not God deliver them over to the sinners, because they were not delivered over by their own longing. This then pray with all your might, that God delivered you not over by your own longing to the sinner. For thou by your own longing givest place to the devil. For lo, the devil has set before you gain, invited you to dishonesty; you can not have the gain, unless thou commit the dishonesty: the gain is the bait, dishonesty the snare: do thou so look on the bait, that you see the snare also; for you can not obtain the gain, unless thou commit the dishonesty; and if you commit the dishonesty, you will be caught....Hence is your head overshadowed in the day of battle. For longing causes heat, but the overshadowing of the Lord tempers longing, that we may be able to bridle that whereby we were being hurried away, that we be not so heated as to be drawn to the snare. They have thought against me; leave me not, lest perchance they be exalted. You have in another place, They that oppress me will exult if I be moved. Such are they, because such is the devil also himself....

12. The head of their going about, the toil of their own lips shall cover them Psalm 139:9. Me, he says, the shadow of Your wings shall cover: for, You have covered me in the day of battle. Them what shall cover? The head of their going about; that is, pride. What is, their going about? How they go about and stand not, how they go in the circle of error, where is journeying without end. He who goes in a straight line, begins from some point, ends at some point: he who goes in a circle, never ends. That is the toil of the wicked, which is set forth yet more plainly in another Psalm, The wicked walk in a circle. But the head of their going about is pride, for pride is the beginning of every sin. But whence is pride the toil of their own lips? Every proud man is false, and every false man is a liar. Men toil in speaking falsehood; for truth they could speak with entire facility. For he toils, who makes what he says: he who wishes to speak the truth, toils not, for truth herself speaks without toil....

13. Coals of fire shall fall upon them upon earth, and You shall cast them down Psalm 139:10. What is, upon earth? Here, even in this life, here coals of fire shall fall upon them. What are, coals of fire? We know these coals. Are they different from those of which we are about to speak? For these I see avail for punishment, those that I am about to speak of, for salvation. For we have spoken of certain coals, when man was seeking aid against a treacherous tongue....The examples of the coals are added to the wound

of the arrows (for I need not fear to say the wound, when the Spouse herself says, I am wounded with love), and then the hay is consumed, and so they are called devouring coals. The hay is devoured, but the gold is purified, and the man exchanges death for life, and begins to be himself too a burning coal; such a coal as was the Apostle, who before was a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious, a coal black and extinguished; but when he had obtained mercy, he was set on fire from heaven, the voice of Christ set him on fire, all the blackness in him perished, he began to be fervent in spirit, to set others on fire with that wherewith he was set on fire himself....

14. A man full of words shall not be guided upon earth Psalm 139:11. A man full of words loves lies. For what pleasure has he, save in speaking? He cares not what he speaks, so long as he speaks. It cannot be that he will be guided. What then ought the servant of God to do, who is kindled with these coals, and himself made a coal of salvation, what should he do? He should wish rather to hear than to speak; as it is written, Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak. James 1:19 And if it may be so, let him desire this, not to be obliged to speak and talk and teach....I can quickly tell you wherein each one may prove himself, not by never speaking, but by requiring a case where it is his duty to speak; let him be glad to be silent, in will, let him speak to teach, when he must. For when must thou needs speak and teach? When you meet with one ignorant, when you meet with one unlearned. If it delight you always to teach, you wish always to have some ignorant one to teach....Evil shall hunt the unrighteous man to destruction. Evils come, and he stands not; therefore said he, they shall hunt him to destruction. For many good men, many righteous men evils have befallen, evils have, as it were, found them. Therefore when the evil pursued the good, that is, our martyrs, when they seized them, they hunted them, but not to destruction. For the flesh was pressed down, the spirit was crowned; the spirit was cast out from the body, yet was nought done to the flesh which might hinder it for the future. Let the flesh be burned, scourged, mangled; is it therefore withdrawn from its Creator, because it is given into the hands of its persecutor? Will not He who created it from nothing, remake it better than it was?

15. I know that the Lord will maintain the right of the needy Psalm 139:12. This needy one is not full of words; for he that is full of words, wishes to abound, knows not to hunger. He is needy of whom it is said, Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. Matthew 5:6 They groan among the stumbling-blocks of the wicked, they pray to their Head, to be delivered from the wicked man. And the cause of the poor. These then are they whose cause the Lord will not neglect; although now they suffer hardships, their glory shall appear, when their Head appears. For to such while placed here it is said, You are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. Colossians 3:3 So then we are poor, our life is hid; let us cry to Him that is our Bread. John 6:51 ...

16. But the just shall confess to Your Name Psalm 139:13. Both when You shall plead their cause, and when You shall maintain their right, they shall confess to Your Name; nought shall they attribute to their own merits, all they shall attribute to nought save to Your mercy....Therefore see what follows, see wherewith he concludes. The upright shall dwell with Your Countenance. For ill was it with them in their own countenance; well will it be with them with Your Countenance. For when they loved their own countenance, In the sweat of their countenance did they eat bread. Genesis 3:19 Your Countenance shall come to them with abundance to satisfy them. Nought more shall they seek, for nought better have they; no more shall they abandon You, nor be abandoned by You. For after His Resurrection, what was said of the Lord? You shall fill me with joy with Your Countenance. Without His Countenance He would not give us joy. For this do we cleanse our countenance, that we may rejoice in His Countenance. 1 John 3:2 ...Because too, blessed are the poor in heart, for they shall see God; Matthew 5:8 He gave the Form of

Man both to good and evil, the Form of God He preserved for the pure and good, that we may rejoice in Him, and it may be well with us for ever with His Countenance.

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