

Exposition on Psalm 141

by St. Augustine

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer, the power of the Lord's words, and the significance of the martyrs' deaths in enriching the earth with the precious death of the saints.

Scripture: Psalm 140:1-10

Topics: "Christian Suffering", "Prayer Life"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the Psalms, highlighting the depth and richness of the verses that may seem obscure at first but reveal familiar truths when expounded. He delves into the themes of prayer, suffering, sacrifice, and the importance of guarding one's heart and words. Augustine emphasizes the significance of Christ's suffering and the martyrs' sacrifices, showing how their deaths enriched the Church and spread the Gospel. He encourages believers to focus on God's promises, seek mercy and correction, and remain steadfast in the face of persecution and temptation, drawing parallels between Christ's journey and the challenges faced by His followers.

Transcript

1. ...The Psalm which we have just sung is in many parts somewhat obscure. When by the help of the Lord what has been said shall begin to be expounded and explained, you will see that you are hearing things which you knew already. But for this cause are they said in manifold ways, that variety of expression may remove all weariness of the truth....

2. Lord, I have cried unto You, hear Thou me Psalm 140:1. This we all can say. This not I alone say: whole Christ says it. But it is said rather in the name of the Body: for He too, when He was here and bore our flesh, prayed; and when He prayed, drops of blood streamed down from His whole Body. So is it written in the Gospel: Jesus prayed earnestly, and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood. Luke 22:44 What is this flowing of sweat from His whole Body, but the suffering of martyrs from the whole Church? Listen unto the voice of my prayer, while I cry unto You. You thought the business of crying already finished, when you said, I have cried unto You. You have cried; yet think not yourself safe. If tribulation be finished, crying is finished: but if tribulation remain for the Church, for the Body of Christ, even to the end of the world, let it not only say, I have cried unto You, but also, Listen unto the voice of my prayer.

3. Let my prayer be set forth in Your sight as incense, and the lifting up of my hands an evening sacrifice Psalm 140:2. That this is wont to be understood of the Head Himself, every Christian acknowledges. For when the day was now sinking towards evening, the Lord upon the Cross laid down His life to take it

again, John 10:17 did not lose it against His will. Still we too are figured there. For what of Him hung upon the tree, save what He took of us? And how can it be that the Father should leave and abandon His only begotten Son, especially when He is one God with Him? Yet, fixing our weakness upon the Cross, where, as the Apostle says, our old man is crucified with Him, Romans 6:6 He cried out in the voice of that our old man, Why have You forsaken Me? That then is the evening sacrifice, the Passion of the Lord, the Cross of the Lord, the offering of a salutary Victim, the whole burnt offering acceptable to God. That evening sacrifice produced, in His Resurrection, a morning offering. Prayer then, purely directed from a faithful heart, rises like incense from a hallowed altar. Nought is more delightful than the odour of the Lord: such odour let all have who believe.

4. ...Set, O Lord, a watch before my mouth, and a door of restraint around my lips Psalm 140:3. He said not a barrier of restraint, but a door of restraint. A door is opened as well as shut. If then it be a door, let it be both opened and shut; opened, to confession of sin; closed, to excusing sin. So will it be a door of restraint, not of ruin. For what does this door of restraint profit us? What does Christ pray in the name of His Body? That Thou turn not aside My heart to wicked words Psalm 140:4. What is, My heart? The heart of My Church; the heart, that is, of My Body....

5. But when your heart has not been turned aside, O member of Christ, when your heart has not been turned aside to wicked words, to making excuses in sins, with men that work in iniquity, you shall also not unite with their elect. For this follows, And I will not unite with their elect. Who are their elect? Those who justify themselves. Who are their elect? Those who trust in themselves that they are righteous, and despise others, as the Pharisee said in the temple, Lord, I thank You that I am not as other men are. Luke 18:11 Who are their elect? This Man, if He were a prophet, would know what manner of woman this is that touched His feet. Luke 7:39 Here you recognise the words of that other Pharisee, who invited our Lord to his house; when the woman of that city, who was a sinner, came and approached His Feet....

For even this woman herself, if her heart had turned aside to wicked words, would not have lacked wherewith to defend her sins. Do not women daily, her equals in defilement, but not her equals in confession, harlots, adulteresses, doers of shameful deeds, defend their sins? If they have not been seen, they deny them: if they have been caught and convicted, or have done their deeds openly, they defend them. And how easy is their defence, how ready, yet how headlong; how common, yet how blasphemous! Had God not willed it, I had not done it: God willed it: fortune willed it: fate willed it...These are the defences of the elect of this world. But let the members of Christ, the Body of Christ, say, let Christ say in the name of His Body, Turn not Thou aside, My Heart, to wicked words, etc., and I will not unite with their elect....

6. With men that work wickedness. What wickedness? Let me mention some sinful wickedness of theirs. Let me tell you one open sinful wickedness, which they acknowledge. They say, it is better for a man to be an usurer than a husbandman. Thou ask the reason, and they assign one....He vexes the members of Christ, who cleanses the earth with a furrow: he vexes the members of Christ, who pulls grass from the earth: he vexes the members of Christ, who plucks an apple from a tree. To avoid committing their imaginary murders in the farm, he commits real murders in usury. He deals no bread to the needy. See whether there can be greater unrighteousness than this righteousness. He deals not bread to the hungry. You ask, why? Lest the beggar receive the life which is in the bread, which they call a member of God, the substance of God, and bind it in flesh. What then are you doing? Why do you eat? Have you not flesh? Yes; but we, they say, forasmuch as we are enlightened by faith in Manes, by our prayers and our Psalms, forasmuch as we are elect, we cleanse thereby that bread, and transmit it into the treasure-house of the

heavens. Such are the elect, that they are not to be saved by God, but saviours of God. And this is Christ, they say, crucified in the whole universe. I received in the Gospel Christ a Saviour, but you are in your books the saviours of Christ. Plainly you are blasphemers of Christ, and therefore not to be saved by Christ. Therefore lest a crumb be given to the hungry, and in the crumb a member of Christ suffer, is the hungry to die of hunger? False mercy to a crumb causes true murder of a man. But who are their elect? Turn not thou aside, my heart, to wicked words, and I will not unite with their elect.

7. The righteous One shall amend me in mercy, and convict me Psalm 140:5. Behold the sinner confessing. He desires to be amended in mercy, rather than praised deceitfully....Shall convict me, but in mercy: shall convict, yet hates not: yea, shall all the more convict, because He hates not. And why does he therefore give thanks? Because, rebuke a wise man, and he will love you. Proverbs 9:8 The righteous One shall amend me. Because He persecutes you? God forbid. He requires rather amending himself, who amends in hate. Wherefore then does He amend? In mercy. And shall convict me. Wherein? In mercy. For the oil of a sinner shall not enrich my head. My head shall not grow by flattery. Undue praise is flattery: undue praise of a flatterer is the oil of a sinner. Therefore men too, when they have mocked any one with false praise, say, I have anointed his head. Love then to be convicted by the righteous One in mercy; love not to be praised by a sinner in mockery. Have oil in yourselves, and you shall not seek the oil of a sinner..

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8. You say to me, What am I doing? I am beset with flatterers; they cease not to besiege me; they praise in me what I would not, that praise in me what I hold in little esteem; what I hold dear they blame in me; flatterers, treacherous, deceivers. For instance, Gaiuseius is a great man, great, learned, wise; but why is he a Christian? For great is his learning, great his reading, great his wisdom. If great is his wisdom, approve of his being a Christian; if great his learning, learnedly has he chosen.

In fine, what you revile, that pleases him whom you praise. But what? That praise sweetens not: it is the oil of a sinner. Yet ceases he not to speak so. Let him not therewith fatten your head; that is, rejoice not in such things; agree not to such things; consent not to such things; rejoice not in such things; and then, if he have applied to you the oil of flattery, yet has your head remained as it was, it has not been puffed up, it has not swollen....For still shall My word be well-pleasing to them.

Wait awhile: now they revile Me, says Christ. In the early times of the Christians, the Christians were blamed on all sides. Wait as yet; and My word shall be well-pleasing to them. The time shall come when they shall conquer thousands of men, who shall beat their breasts, and say, Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Even now, how many remain who blush to beat their breasts? Let them then blame us: let us bear it. Let them blame; let them hate, accuse, detract; still shall My word be well-pleasing to them; the time shall come when My word shall please them....O wordy defence of iniquity!

Verily now whole nations say this, and the thunder of nations beating their breasts ceases not. Rightly do the clouds thunder, wherein now God dwells. Where is now that wordiness, where that boasting, I am righteous; nought of ill have I done? Verily, when you have contemplated in Holy Scripture the law of righteousness, how far soever you have advanced, you shall find yourself a sinner....What sort of man am I now speaking of, brethren? I speak of him who worships God alone, who confesses Christ, who knows the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost to be one God; who commits not fornication against Him; who worships not devils; who seeks him not aid from the devil; who holds the Catholic Church; whom no one complains of as cheating; under whose oppression no weak neighbour groans; who assails not another's wife; who is content with his own, or even without his own, in such wise as is lawful, and as Apostolical

discipline permits, with consent of both, 1 Corinthians 7:5 or when she is not yet married.

Even he who is such as this, is yet overtaken in such things as I have mentioned. For all these daily sins then what is our hope, save to say with humble heart in the Lord's Prayer, while we defend not our sins, but confess them, Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; Matthew 6:12 and to have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, that He may be the propitiation for our sins? 1 John 2:1-2 See what follows: their judges have been swallowed up beside the Rock Psalm 140:6.

What is, swallowed up beside the Rock? That Rock was Christ. 1 Corinthians 10:4 They have been swallowed up beside the Rock. Beside, that is, compared, as judges, as mighty, powerful, learned: they are called their judges, as judging about morals, and laying down their opinions. This Aristotle said. Set him beside the Rock, and he is swallowed up. Who is Aristotle? Let him hear, Christ has said, and he trembles among the dead. This Pythagoras said, that Plato said. Set them beside the Rock, compare their authority to the authority of the Gospel, compare the proud to the Crucified.

Say we to them You have written your words in the hearts of the proud; He has planted His Cross in the hearts of kings: finally, He died, and rose again; you are dead, and I will not ask how ye rise again. So their judges have been swallowed up beside that Rock. So long do their words seem somewhat, till they are compared with the Rock. Therefore if any of them be found to have said what Christ too has said, we congratulate him, but we follow him not. But he came before Christ.

If any man speak what is true, is he therefore before the Truth itself? Regard Christ, O man, not when He came to you, but when He made you. The sick man too might say, But I took to my bed before the physician came to me. Why, for that very reason has He come last, because you first have sickened.

9. They shall hear My Words, for they have prevailed. My Words have prevailed over their words. They have spoken clever things, I true things. To praise one who talks well is one thing, to praise One who speaks truth is another. They shall hear My Words, for they have prevailed. How have they prevailed? Who of them has been taken offering sacrifice, when such things were forbidden by the law, and has not denied it? Who of them has been taken worshipping an idol, and has not exclaimed, I did it not, and feared lest he should be convicted? Such servants has the devil. But how have the Words of the Lord prevailed? Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. Fear not those who kill the body, etc. He gave them fear, He suggested hope, He kindled love. Fear not death, He says. Do ye fear death? I die first. Fear ye, lest a hair of your head perish? I first rise again in the flesh uninjured. Rightly have ye heard His Words, for they have prevailed. They spoke, and were slain; they fell, and yet stood. And what was the result of so many deaths of martyrs, save that those words prevailed, and the earth being, so to speak, watered by the blood of Christ's witnesses, the cross of the Church shot up everywhere? How have they prevailed? We have said already, when they were preached by men who feared not. Feared not what? Neither banishment, nor losses, nor death, nor crucifixion: for it was not death alone that they did not fear; but even crucifixion, a death than which none was thought more accursed. It the Lord endured, that His disciples might not only not fear death, but not even that kind of death. When then these things are said by men that fear not, they have prevailed.

10. What then have all those deaths of the martyrs accomplished? Listen: As the fatness of the earth is spread over the earth, our bones have been scattered beside the pit Psalm 140:7. The bones of the martyrs, that is, the bodies of the witnesses of Christ. The martyrs were slain, and they who slew them seemed to prevail. They prevailed by persecution, that the words of Christ might prevail by preaching. And

what was the result of the deaths of the saints? What means, the fatness of the earth is spread over the earth? We know that everything that is refuse is the fatness of the earth. The things which are, as it were, contemptible to men, enrich the earth....Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. As it is contemptible to the world, so is it precious to the husbandman. For he knows the use thereof, and its rich juice; he knows what he desires, what he seeks, whence the fertile crop arises; but this world despises it. Do you not know that God has chosen the contemptible things of the world, and those which are not, like as those which are, that the things which are may be brought to nought? 1 Corinthians 1:27-28 From the dunghill was Peter lifted up, and Paul; when they were put to death, they were despised: now, the earth having been enriched by them, and the cross of the Church springing up, behold, all that is noble and chief in the world, even the emperor himself, comes to Rome, and whither does he hasten? To the temple of the emperor, or the memorial of the fisherman?

11. For unto You, Lord, are my eyes; in You have I hoped, take not Thou away my life Psalm 140:8. For they were tortured in persecutions, and many failed. It occurs to him that many have failed, many have been in hazard, and as it were in the midst of the tribulation of persecution is sent forth the voice of one praying; For unto You, Lord, are my eyes: I care not what they threaten who stand around, unto You, Lord, are my eyes. More do I fix my eye on Your promises than on their threats. I know what You have suffered for me, what You have promised me.

12. Keep me from the trap which they have laid for me Psalm 140:9. What was the trap? If you consent, I spare you. In the trap was set the bait of the present life; if the bird love this bait, it falls into the trap: but if the bird be able to say, The day of man have I not desired: You know: Jeremiah 17:16 He shall pluck his feet out of the net, etc. Two things he has mentioned to be distinguished the one from the other: the trap he said was set by persecutors; the stumbling-blocks came from those who have consented and apostatised: and from both he desires to be guarded. On the one side they threaten and rage, on the other consent and fall: I fear lest the one be such, that I fear him; the other such, that I imitate him. This I do to you, if you consent not. Keep me from the trap, etc. Behold, your brother has already consented. And from the stumbling-blocks, etc.

13. Sinners shall fall into his nets Psalm 140:10. Not all sinners, certain sinners, who are so great sinners, as to love this life to such a degree as to prefer it to everlasting life, shall fall into his trap. But what do you say? Shall they that are such, do you think, fall into his nets? What of Your disciples, O Christ? Behold, when persecution was raging, when they all left You alone, and went every one to his own: John 16:32 lo! They who were closest to You, in Your trial and persecution, when Your enemies demanded You to be crucified, abandoned You. And that bold one, who had promised You that he would go with You even unto death, heard from the Physician what was being done in him, the sick man. For being in a fever, he had said he was whole; but the Lord touched the vein of his heart. Then came the trial; then came the test; then came the accusation; and now, questioned not by some great power, but by a humble slave, and that a woman, questioned by a handmaid, he yielded; he denied thrice....He wept bitterly, it says. Not yet was he fitted to suffer. To him was said, You shall follow Me afterwards. John 13:36 Hereafter he was to be firm, having been strengthened by the Lord's Resurrection. Not yet then was it time that those bones should be scattered beside the pit. For see how many failed, even to those who first hung on His mouth; even they failed. Wherefore? I am alone, until I pass over: for this follows in the Psalm....

14. Pascha, as they say who know, and who have explained to us what to read, means Passover. When then the Lord's Passion was about to come, the Evangelist, as though he would use this very word, says, When the hour had come that Jesus should pass over to the Father. John 13:1 We hear then of Pascha in

this verse, I am alone, until I pass over. After Pascha I shall no longer be alone, after passing-over I shall no longer be alone. Many shall imitate Me, many shall follow Me. And if afterward they shall follow, what shall be the case now? I am alone, until I pass over. What is it that the Lord says in this Psalm, I am alone, until I pass over? What is it that we have expounded? If we have understood it, listen to His own words in the Gospel. Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone; but if it die, it bears much fruit.. ..Therefore He was alone before He was put to death....So far was any from dying for the Name, that is, for confessing the Name of Christ, before that Corn of wheat fell into the ground, that even John, who was slain just before Him, being given by a wicked king to a dancing woman, was not put to death because he confessed Christ. Of course he might have been put to death for this, and that by many. If for another reason he was put to death by one man, how much more might he have been put to death by those very men, who put Christ to death? For John gave testimony to Christ. They who heard Christ, wished to slay Him; the man who gave testimony to Him they slew not....He is not slain by the Jews who gave free testimony to Christ, whom the Jews slew; he is slain by Herod, because he said to him, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. Matthew 14:4 For his brother had not died without issue. For the law of truth, for equity, for righteousness' sake, he did die: therefore is he a saint, therefore a martyr; but yet he died not for that Name whereby we are Christians, wherefore, save that the saying might be fulfilled, I am alone, until I pass over.

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