

Exposition on Psalm 144

by St. Augustine

The sermon emphasizes the importance of unity, works of mercy, and heavenly aid in the Body of Christ's battles against the enemy, and the true happiness of the righteous is found in their relationship with God and their longing for eternity.

Scripture: Psalm 143:1-5, Psalm 143:8-10, Psalm 143:12, James 2:13

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Christian Victory"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the spiritual battles we face, drawing parallels between David's victory over Goliath and Christ's triumph over the devil. He emphasizes the importance of relying on God's teachings and guidance for warfare, highlighting the unity and diversity of operations within the Body of Christ. St. Augustine encourages believers to find refuge and deliverance in God amidst the struggles of the flesh, reminding them of the value God places on humanity through His sacrifice. He urges the faithful to seek eternal happiness and blessings from God, rather than being ensnared by temporal pleasures and vanities of the world.

Transcript

1. The title of this Psalm is brief in number of words, but heavy in the weight of its mysteries. To David himself against Goliath. This battle was fought in the time of our fathers, and you, beloved, remember it with me from Holy Scripture....David put five stones in his scribe, he hurled but one. The five Books were chosen, but unity conquered. Then, having smitten and overthrown him, he took the enemy's sword, and with it cut off his head. This our David also did, He overthrew the devil with his own weapons: and when his great ones, whom he had in his power, by means of whom he slew other souls, believe, they turn their tongues against the devil, and so Goliath's head is cut off with his own sword.

2. Blessed be the Lord my God, who teaches my hands for battle, my fingers for war Psalm 143:1. These are our words, if we be the Body of Christ. It seems a repetition of sentiment; our hands for battle, and our fingers for war, are the same. Or is there some difference between hands and fingers? Certainly both hands and fingers work. Not then without reason do we take fingers as put for hands. But still in the fingers we recognise the division of operation, yet still a sort of unity. Behold that grace! The Apostle says, To one, this; to another, that; there are diversities of operations; all these works one and the self-same Spirit; there is the root of unity. With these fingers then the Body of Christ fights, going forth to war, going forth to battle....By works of Mercy our enemy is conquered, and we could not have works of mercy unless we had

charity, and charity we could have none unless we received it by the Holy Ghost; He then teaches our hands for battle, and our fingers for war: to Him rightfully do we say, My Mercy, from whom we have also that we are merciful: for he shall have judgment without mercy, that has showed no mercy. James 2:13

3. My Mercy and my Refuge, my Upholder and my Deliverer Psalm 143:2. Much toils this combatant, having his flesh lusting against his spirit. Keep what you have. Then shall you have in full what you wish, when death shall have been swallowed up in victory; 1 Corinthians 15:54 when this mortal body has been raised, and is changed into the condition of the angels, and rises aloft to a heavenly quality....There is life, there are good days, where nought lusts against the spirit, where it is not said, Fight, but Rejoice. But who is he that lusts for these days? Every man certainly says, I do. Hear what follows. I see that you are toiling, I see that you are engaged in battle, and in danger; hear what follows:...Depart from evil, and do good: let not the poor first weep under you, that the poor may rejoice through you. For what reward, since now you are fighting? Seek peace, and ensue it. Learn and say, My Mercy and my Refuge, mine Upholder and my Deliverer, my Protector: mine Upholder, lest I fall; my Deliverer, lest I stick; my Protector, lest I be stricken. In all these things, in all my toil, in all my battles, in all my difficulties, in Him have I hoped, who subdues my people under me. Behold, our Head speaks together with us.

4. Lord, what is man, that You have become known unto him? Psalm 143:3. All is included in that You have become known unto him. Or the son of man, that Thou valuest him? Thou valuest him, that is, You make him of such importance, You count him of such price, You know under what Thou placest him, over what Thou placest him. For valuing is considering the price of a thing. How greatly did He value man, who for him shed the blood of His only-begotten Son! For God values not man in the same way as one man values another: he, when he finds a slave for sale, gives a higher price for a horse than for a man. Consider how greatly He valued you, that you may be able to say, If God be for us, who can be against us? And how greatly did He value you, who spared not His own Son? How shall He not also with Him freely give us all things? Romans 8:31-32 He who gives this food to the combatant, what keeps He in store for the conqueror?...

5. Man is made like vanity: his days pass away like a shadow Psalm 143:4. What vanity? Time, which passes on, and flows by. For this vanity is said in comparison of the Truth, which ever abides, and never fails: for it too is a work of His Hand, in its degree. For, as it is written, God filled the earth with His good things. Sirach 16:29 What is His? That accord with Him. But all these things, being earthly, fleeting, transitory, if they be compared to that Truth, where it is said, I Am That I Am, Exodus 3:14 all this which passes away is called vanity. For through time it vanishes, like stroke into the air. And why should I say more than that which the Apostle James said, willing to bring down proud men to humility, What is, says he, your life? It is even a vapour, which appears for a little time, and then vanishes away. James 4:14 ...Work then, though it be in the night, with your hands, that is, by good works seek God, before the day come which shall gladden you, lest the day come which shall sadden you. For see how safely you work, who art not left by Him whom you seek, that your Father which sees in secret may reward you openly. Matthew 6:4 ...

6. Lord, bow Your heavens, and come down: touch the mountains, and they shall smoke Psalm 143:5. Flash Your lightning, and You shall scatter them; send forth Your arrows, and You shall confound them Psalm 143:6. Send forth Your Hand from above, and deliver me, and draw me out of many waters Psalm 143:7. The Body of Christ, the humble David, full of grace, relying on God, fighting in this world, calls for the help of God. What are heavens bowed down? Apostles humbled. For those heavens declare the glory of God; and of these heavens declaring the glory of God it is presently said, There is neither speech nor

language, but their voices are heard among them, etc.

When then these heavens sent forth their voices through all lands, and did wonderful things, while the Lord flashed and thundered from them by miracles and commandments, the gods were thought to have come down from heaven to men. For certain of the Gentiles, thinking this, desired even to sacrifice to them....But they commended to these the Lord Jesus Christ, humbling themselves, that God might be praised; because the heavens were bowed, that God might come down....Touch the mountains, and they shall smoke.

So long as they are not touched, they seem to themselves great: they are now about to say, Great are You, O Lord: the mountains also are about to say, Thou only art the Most Highest over all the earth. 7. But there are some that conspire, that gather themselves together against the Lord, and against His Christ. They have come together, they have conspired. Flash forth Your lightnings, and You shall scatter them. Abound with Your miracles, and their conspiracy shall be broken....Send forth Your arrows, and You shall confound them.

Let the unsound be wounded, that, being well wounded, they may be made sound; and let them say, being set now in the Church, in the Body of Christ, let them say with the Church, I am wounded with Love. Send forth Your Hand from on high. What afterward? What in the end? How conquers the Body of Christ? By heavenly aid. For the Lord Himself shall come with the voice of the Archangel, and with the trump of God shall He descend from heaven, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 Himself the Saviour of the body, the Hand of God.

What is, Out of many waters? From many peoples. What peoples? Aliens, unbelievers, whether assailing us from without, or laying snares within. Take me out of many waters, in which You disciplined me, in which You rolled me, to free me from my filth. This is the water of contradiction. Numbers 20:13 ...From the hand of strange children. Hear, brethren, among whom we are, among whom we live, from whom we long to be delivered. Whose mouth has spoken vanity Psalm 143:8. All of you today, if you had not gathered yourselves together to these divine shows of the word of God, and were not at this hour engaged in them, how great vanities would ye be hearing! whose mouth has spoken vanity: when, in short, would they, speaking vanity, hear you speaking vanity?

And their right hand is a right hand of iniquity. What doest thou among them with your pastoral scrip with five stones in it? Say it to me in another form: that same law which you have signified by five stones, signify in some other way also. I will sing a new song unto You, O God Psalm 143:9. A new song is of grace; a new song is of the new man; a new song is of the New Testament. But lest you should think that grace departs from the law, whereas rather by grace the law is fulfilled, upon a psaltery of ten strings will I sing unto You.

Upon the law of ten commandments: therein may I sing to You; therein may I rejoice to You; therein may I sing to You a new song; for, Love is the fulfilling of the law. Romans 13:10 But they who have not love may carry the psaltery, sing they cannot. Contradiction cannot make my psaltery to be silent.

8. Who gives salvation to kings, who redeems David His servant Psalm 143:10. You know who David is; be yourselves David. Whence redeems He David His servant? Whence redeems He Christ? Whence redeems He the Body of Christ? From the sword of ill intent deliver me. From the sword is not sufficient; he adds, of ill intent. Without doubt there is a sword of good intent. What is the sword of good intent? That whereof the Lord says, I came not to send peace on earth, but a sword. Matthew 10:34 For He was about

to separate believers from unbelievers, sons from parents, and to sever all other ties, while the sword cut off what was diseased, but healed the members of Christ. Of good intent then is the sword twice sharpened, powerful with both edges, the Old and New Testaments, with the narration of the past and the promise of the future. That then is the sword of good intent: but the other is of ill intent, wherewith they talk vanity, for that is of good intent, wherewith God speaks verity. For truly the sons of men have teeth which are spears and arrows, and their tongue is a sharp sword. From this sword deliver me Psalm 143:11. And take me out of the hand of strange children, whose mouth has spoken vanity: just as before. And that which follows, their right hand is a right hand of iniquity, the same he had set down before also, when he called them many waters. For lest you should think that the many waters were good waters, he explained them by the sword of ill intent.

9. Whose sons are like young vines firmly planted in their youth Psalm 143:12. He wishes to recount their happiness. Observe, you sons of light, sons of peace: observe, you sons of the Church, members of Christ; observe whom he calls strangers, whom he calls strange children, whom he calls waters of contradiction, whom he calls a sword of ill intent. Observe, I beseech you, for among them you are in peril, among their tongues ye fight against the desires of your flesh, among their tongues, set in the hand of the devil wherewith he fights. Ephesians 6:12 ...What vanity has their mouth spoken, and how is their right hand a right hand of iniquity? Their daughters are fitted and adorned after the similitude of a temple. Their garners are full, bursting out from one store to another: their sheep are fruitful, multiplying in their streets Psalm 143:13: their oxen are fat: their hedge is not broken down, nor their road, nor is their crying in their streets Psalm 143:14. Is not this then happiness? I ask the sons of the kingdom of heaven, I ask the offspring of everlasting resurrection, I ask the body of Christ, the members of Christ, the temple of God. Is not this then happiness, to have sons safe, daughters beautiful, garners full, cattle abundant, no downfall, I say not of a wall, but not even of a hedge, no tumult and clamour in the streets, but quiet, peace, abundance, plenty of all things in their houses and in their cities? Is not this then happiness? Or ought the righteous to shun it? Or do you not find the house of the righteous too abounding with all these things, full of this happiness? Did not Abraham's house abound with gold, silver, children, servants, cattle? What say we? Is not this happiness? Be it so, still it is on the left hand. What is, on the left hand? Temporal, mortal, bodily. I desire not that thou shun it, but that thou think it not to be on the right hand....For what ought they to have set on the right hand? God, eternity, the years of God which fail not, whereof is said, and Your years shall not fail. There should be the right hand, there should be our longing. Let us use the left for the time, let us long for the fight for eternity. If riches increase, set not your heart upon them.. ..

10. They have called the people blessed who have these things Psalm 143:15. O men that speak vanity! They have lost the true right hand, wicked and perverse, they have put on the benefits of God inversely. O wicked ones, O speakers of vanity, O strange children! What was on the left hand, they have set on the right. What do you, David? What do you, Body of Christ? What do ye, members of Christ? What do ye, not strange children, but children of God?...What do you say? Say ye with us, Blessed is the people whose Lord is their God.

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