

Exposition on Psalm 146

by St. Augustine

The sermon emphasizes the importance of hope in God and the Lord's care for all living things, encouraging believers to trust in Him and not in princes or mortals.

Scripture: Psalm 145:2

Topics: "Praising God", "Spiritual Hope"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the importance of praising God in times of trouble, encouraging the soul to find hope and joy in God's promises. He emphasizes the superiority of the soul over the body, highlighting the spiritual nature of the soul and its ability to give counsel to itself through the wisdom of God. St. Augustine warns against putting trust in earthly powers, urging believers to rely on the God of Jacob for true help and salvation.

Transcript

1. ...Behold the Psalm sounds; it is the voice of some one (and that some one are you, if you will), of some one encouraging his soul to praise God, and saying to himself, Praise the Lord, O my soul Psalm 145:1. For sometimes in the tribulations and temptations of this present life, whether we will or no, our soul is troubled; of which troubling he speaks in another Psalm. But to remove this troubling, he suggests joy; not as yet in reality, but in hope; and says to it when troubled and anxious, sad and sorrowing, Hope in God, for I will yet confess to Him....

2. But who says it, and to whom says he it? What shall we say, brethren? Is it the flesh that says, Praise thou the Lord, O my soul? And can the flesh suggest good counsel to the soul? However much the flesh be conquered, and subjected as a servant to us through strength which the Lord imparts, that it serve us entirely as a bond slave, enough for us that it hinder us not....For the body, inasmuch as it is the body, is even beneath the soul; and every soul, however vile, is found more excellent than the most excellent body.

And let not this seem to you to be wonderful, that even any vile and sinful soul is better than any great and most surpassing body. It is better, not in deserts, but in nature. The soul indeed is sinful, is stained with certain defilements of lusts; yet gold, though rusted, is better than the most polished lead. Let your mind then run over every part of creation, and you will see that what we are saying is not incredible, that a soul, however blameable, is yet more praiseworthy than a praiseworthy body.

There are two things, a soul and a body. The soul I chide, the body I praise: the soul I chide, because it is sinful; the body I praise, because it is sound. Yet it is in its own kind that I praise the soul, and in its own kind that I blame the soul: and so in its own kind I praise the body, or blame it. If you ask me which is better, what I have blamed or what I have praised, wondrous is the answer you will receive....So you speak of the best horse and the worst man: yet you prefer the man you find fault with to the horse you praise.

The nature of the soul is more excellent than the nature of the body: it surpasses it by far, it is a thing spiritual, incorporeal, akin to the substance of God. It is somewhat invisible, it rules the body, moves the limbs, guides the senses, prepares thoughts, puts forth actions, takes in images of countless things; who is there, in short, beloved brethren, who may suffice for the praises of the soul? And yet such is the grace given to it, that this man says, Praise the Lord, O my soul....It is not the flesh that says it.

Let the body be angel-like, still it is inferior to the soul, it cannot give advice to its superior. The flesh when duly obedient is the handmaid of the soul: the soul rules, the body obeys; the soul commands, the body performs; how then can the flesh give this advice to the soul? Is it then perchance the soul herself, who says to herself, and in a manner commands herself, and exhorts and asks herself? For through certain passions in one part of her nature she wavered; but in another part, which they call the reasonable mind, the wisdom whereby she thinks, clinging to God, and now sighing towards Him, she perceives that certain inferior parts of her are troubled by worldly emotions, and by a certain excitement of earthly desires, betake them to outward things, leaving God who is within; so she recalls herself from things outward to inward, from lower to higher, and says, Praise the Lord, O my soul....The soul itself gives itself counsel from the light of God by the reasonable mind, whereby it conceives the wisdom fixed in the everlasting nature of its Author.

It reads there of somewhat to be feared, to be praised, to be loved, to be longed for, and sought after: as yet it grasps it not, it comprehends it not; it is, as it were, dazzled with brightness; it has not strength to abide there. Therefore it gathers itself, as it were, into a sound state, and says, Praise the Lord, O my soul....And then the soul, weighed down, as it were, and unable to stand up as is fitting, answers the mind, I will praise the Lord in my life Psalm 145:2.

What is, in my life? Because now I am in my death. Therefore first encourage yourself, and say, Praise the Lord, O my soul. Your soul answers you, I do praise so far as I can, slightly, poorly, weakly. Wherefore? Because, while we are in the body, we are absent from the Lord. 2 Corinthians 5:6 ...

3. In my life. Now what has it? It might answer you, My death. Whence, My death? Because I am absent from the Lord. For if to cling to Him is life, to depart from Him is death. But what comforts you? Hope. Now you live in hope: in hope praise, in hope sing. Your death is from the sadness of this life, you live in hope of a future life. And how will you praise your Lord? I will sing unto my God, as long as I have my being. What sort of praise is this, I will sing unto my God as long as I have being? Behold, my brethren, what sort of being this will be; where there will be everlasting praise, there will be also everlasting being. Behold, now you have being: do you sing unto God as long as you have being? Behold, you were singing, and hast turned yourself away to some business, you sing no longer, yet you have being: you have being, yet you sing not. It may be also your desire turns you to somewhat; not only do you not sing, but thou even offendest His ears, yet you have being. What praise will that be, when you praise as long as you have being? But what means, as long as I have being? Will there be any time when he will not be? Nay, rather, that long will be everlasting, and therefore it will be truly long. For whatever has end in time, however

prolonged it is, is yet not long....

4. Put not your trust in princes Psalm 145:3. Brethren, here we receive a mighty task; it is a voice from heaven, from above it sounds to us. For now through some kind of weakness the soul of man, whenever it is in tribulation here, despairs of God, and chooses to rely on man. Let it be said to one when set in some affliction, There is a great man, by whom you may be set free; he smiles, he rejoices, he is lifted up. But if it is said to him, God frees you, he is chilled, so to speak, by despair. The aid of a mortal is promised, and you rejoice, the aid of the Immortal is promised, and are you sad? It is promised you that you shall be freed by one who needs to be freed with you, and you exult, as at some great aid: you are promised that Liberator, who needs none to free Him, and you despair, as though it were but a fable. Woe to such thoughts: they wander far; truly there is sad and great death in them. Approach, begin to long, begin to seek and to know Him by whom you were made. For He will not leave His work, if He be not left by His work.

5. ...His breath shall go forth, and he shall return to his earth: in that day shall all his thoughts perish Psalm 145:4. Where is swelling? Where is pride? Where is boasting? But perhaps he will have passed to a good place, if indeed he have passed. For I know not whither he who spoke thus has passed. For he spoke in pride; and I know not whither such men pass, save that I look into another Psalm, and see that their passage is an evil one. I beheld the wicked lifted up above the cedars of Libanus, and I passed by, and, lo, he was not; and I sought him, and his place was not found. The good man, who passed by, and found not the wicked, reached a place where the wicked is not. Wherefore, brethren, let us all listen: brethren, beloved of God, let us all listen; in whatsoever tribulation, in whatsoever longing for the heavenly gift, let us not trust in princes, nor in sons of men, in whom is no salvation. All this is mortal, fleeting, perishable.

What then must we do, if we are not to hope in sons of men, nor in princes? What must we do? Blessed is he whose Helper is the God of Jacob Psalm 145:5: not this man or that man; not this angel or that angel; but, blessed is he whose Helper is the God of Jacob: for to Jacob also so great an Helper was He, that of Jacob He made him Israel. O mighty help! now he is Israel, seeing God. While then you are placed here, and a wanderer not yet seeing God, if you have the God of Jacob for your Helper, from Jacob you will become Israel, and will be seeing God, and all toil and all groans shall come to an end, gnawing cares shall cease, happy praises shall succeed.

Blessed is he whose Helper is the God of Jacob; of this Jacob. Wherefore is he happy? Meanwhile, while yet groaning in this life, his hope is in the Lord his God....Who is this, Lord his God?...To us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things. 1 Corinthians 8:6 Therefore let Him be your hope, even the Lord your God; in Him let your hope be. His hope too is in the lord his god, who worships Saturn; his hope is in the lord his god, who worships Neptune or Mercury; yea more, I add, who worships his belly, of whom is said, whose god is their belly.

Philippians 3:19 The one is the god of the one, the other of the other. Who is this blessed one? For his hope is in the Lord his God. But who is He? Who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them Psalm 145:6. My brethren, we have a great God; let us bless His holy Name, that He has deigned to make us His possession. As yet you see not God; you can not fully love what as yet you see not. All that you see, He has made. Thou admirest the world; why not the Maker of the world?

Thou lookest up to the heavens, and art amazed: you consider the whole earth, and tremblest; when can you contain in your thought the vastness of the sea? Look at the countless number of the stars, look at all

the many kind of seeds, all the different sorts of animals, all that swims in the water, creeps on the earth, flies in the sky, hovers in the air; how great are all these, how beautiful, how fair, how amazing! Behold, He who made all these, is your God. Put your hope in Him, that you may be happy.

His hope is in the Lord his God. Observe, my brethren, the mighty God, the good God, who makes all these things....If he mentioned these things only, perhaps you would answer me, God, who made heaven and earth and sea, is a great God: but does He think of me? It would be said to you, He made you. How so? Am I heaven, or am I earth, or am I sea? Surely it is plain; I am neither heaven, nor earth, nor sea: yet I am on earth. At least you grant me this, that you are on earth. Hear then, that God made not only heaven and earth and sea: for He made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them.

If then He made all that is in them, He made you also. It is too little to say, you; the sparrow, the locust, the worm, none of these did He not make, and He cares for all. His care refers not to His commandment, for this commandment He gave to man alone....As regards then the tenor of the commandment, God does not take care for oxen: 1 Corinthians 9:9 as regards His providential care of the universe, whereby He created all things, and rules the world, You, Lord, shall save both man and beast.

Here perhaps some one may say to me, God cares not for oxen, comes from the New Testament: You, Lord, shall save both man and beast, is from the Old Testament. There are some who find fault and say, that these two Testaments agree not with one another....Let us hear the Lord Himself, the Chief and Master of the Apostles: Consider, says He, the fowls of the air; they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and your heavenly Father feeds them. Matthew 6:26 Therefore even beside men, these animals are objects of care to God, to be fed, not to receive a law.

As far then as regards giving a law, God cares not for oxen: as regards creating, feeding, governing, ruling, all things have to do with God. Are not two sparrows sold for one farthing? says our Lord Jesus Christ, and one of them shall not fall to the ground without the will of your Father: how much better are you than they. Matthew 10:29 Perhaps you say, God counts me not in this great multitude. There follows here a wondrous passage in the Gospel: the hairs of your head are all numbered. Matthew 10:30

6. Who keeps truth for ever. What truth for ever? What truth does He keep, and wherein does He keep it for ever? Who executes judgment for them that suffer wrong Psalm 145:7. He avenges them that suffer wrong. There comes at once to you the voice of the Apostle: now therefore there is altogether a fault among you, that you go to law one with another: why do ye not rather suffer wrong? 1 Corinthians 6:7 He urged you not to suffer annoyance, but to suffer wrong: for not every annoyance is wrong. For whatever you suffer lawfully is not a wrong; lest perchance you should say, I also am among those who have suffered wrong, for I have suffered such a thing in such a place, and such a thing for such a reason. Consider whether you have suffered a wrong. Robbers suffer many things, but they suffer no wrong. Wicked men, evil doers, house-breakers, adulterers, seducers, all these suffer many evils, yet is there no wrong. It is one thing to suffer wrong; it is another to suffer tribulation, or penalty, or annoyance, or punishment. Consider where you are; see what you have done; see why you are suffering; and then you see what you are suffering. Right and wrong are contraries. Right is what is just. For not all that is called right, is right. What if a man lay down for you unjust right? Nor indeed is it to be called right, if it is unjust. That is true right, which is also just. Consider what you have done, not what you are suffering. If you have done right, you are suffering wrong; if you have done wrong, you are suffering right....

7. Who gives food to the hungry. Behold, from you I look for nothing: God gives food to the hungry. Who are the hungry? All. What is, all? To all things that have life, to all men He gives food: does He not reserve some food for His beloved? If they have another kind of hunger, they have also another kind of food. Let us first enquire what their hunger is, and then we shall find their food. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. Matthew 5:6 We ought to be God's hungry ones....The Lord looses them that are fettered; the Lord lifts up them that are dashed down; the Lord makes wise them that are blind Psalm 145:8. Perfectly has he by this last sentence explained to us all the preceding ones: lest perchance, when he had said, the Lord looses them that are fettered, we should refer it to those fettered ones, who for some crime are bound in irons by their masters: and in that he said, He lifts up them that are dashed down, there should occur to our minds some one stumbling or falling, or thrown from a horse. There is another kind of fall, there are other kinds of fetters, just as there is other darkness and other light. Whereas he said, He makes the blind wise; he would not say, He enlightened the blind, lest you should understand this also in reference to the flesh, as the man was enlightened by the Lord, when He anointed his eyes with clay made with spittle, and so healed him: that you might not look for anything of this sort, when He is speaking of spiritual things, he points to a sort of light of wisdom, wherewith the blind are enlightened. Therefore in the same way as the blind are enlightened with the light of wisdom, so are the fettered set free, and those who are dashed down are lifted up. Whereby then have we been fettered? Whereby dashed down? Our body was once an ornament to us: now, we have sinned, and thereby have had fetters put on us. What are our fetters? Our mortality....The Lord loves the righteous. And who are the righteous? How far are they righteous now? Just as you have; the Lord, guards proselytes Psalm 145:9. Proselytes are strangers. Every Church of the Gentiles is a stranger. For it comes in to the Fathers, not sprung of their flesh, but their daughter by imitating them. Yet the Lord, not any man, guards them. The orphan and widow He will take up. Let none think that He takes up the orphan for his inheritance, or the widow for any business of hers. True, God does help them; and in all the duties of the human race, he does a good work, who takes care of an orphan, who abandons not a widow: but in a certain way we are all orphans, not because our Father is dead, but because He is absent.. ..

8. And the way of sinners He shall root out. What is, the way of sinners? To mock at these things which we say. Who is an orphan, who a widow? What kingdom of heaven, what punishment of hell is there? These are fables of the Christians. To what I see, to that will I live: let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. 1 Corinthians 15:32 Beware lest such men persuade you of anything: let them not enter through your ears into your heart; let them find thorns in your ears: let him, who seeks to enter thus, go away pierced: for evil communications corrupt good manners. 1 Corinthians 15:33 But here perhaps you will say, Wherefore then are they prosperous? Behold, they worship not God, and commit every kind of evil daily: yet they abound in those things, through want of which I toil. Be not envious against sinners. What they receive, you see, what is in store for them, do you not see?...Will you not believe even the Lord your God, who says, Broad and spacious is the way that leads to destruction, and many there be that walk by it? Matthew 7:13 This way the Lord will root out. And, when the way of sinners has been rooted out, what remains for us? Come, you blessed of My father, enjoy the Kingdom; Matthew 25:34 The Lord shall reign for ever Psalm 145:10. O Sion, your God shall reign for ever; surely your God will not reign without you. For generation and generation. He has said it twice, because he could not say it for ever. And think not that eternity is bounded by finite words. The word eternity consists of four syllables; in itself it is without end. It could not be commended to you, save thus, for generation and generation. Too little has he said: if he spoke it all day long, it were too narrow: if he spoke it all his life, must he not at length hold his peace? Love eternity: without end shall you reign, if Christ be your End, with whom you shall reign for ever and ever. Amen.

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