

Exposition on Psalm 43

by St. Augustine

The sermon explores the theme of seeking God's strength and guidance in times of trouble and temptation, and the importance of patience, humility, and cheerful giving.

Scripture: Matthew 24:13

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Righteous Living"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the Psalms, emphasizing the importance of feeding our souls with God's Word, especially during times of fasting and hunger. He delves into the concept of separation between the righteous and the ungodly, highlighting the need for God's judgment and mercy. Augustine stresses the significance of enduring with patience and seeking strength from God amidst daily temptations and trials. He encourages believers to seek God's Light and Truth, which lead to His holy hill and Tabernacles, symbolizing the Church and eternal life. The sermon concludes with a call to engage in good works, such as fasting, almsgiving, and prayer, with a cheerful heart, as a means of righteousness and drawing closer to God.

Transcript

1. This Psalm is a short one; it satisfies the mental cravings of the hearers, without imposing too severe a trial on the hunger of those fasting. Let our soul feed upon it; our soul, which he who sings in this Psalm, speaks of as cast down; cast down, I suppose, either in consequence of some fist, or rather in consequence of some hunger he was in. For fasting is a voluntary act; being an-hungered is an involuntary thing. That which is an-hungered, is the Church, is the Body of Christ: and that Man who is extended throughout the whole world, of which the Head is above, the limbs below: it is His voice which ought by this time to be perfectly known, and perfectly familiar, to us, in all the Psalms; now chanting joyously, now sorrowing; now rejoicing in hope, now sighing at its actual state, even as if it were our own. We need not then dwell long on pointing out to you, who is the speaker here: let each one of us be a member of Christ's Body; and he will be speaker here....

2. Judge me, O Lord, and separate my cause from the ungodly nation Psalm 42:1. I do not dread Your judgment, because I know Your mercy. Judge me, O God, he cries. Now, meanwhile, in this state of pilgrimage, Thou dost not yet separate my place, because I am to live together with the tares even to the time of the harvest: Thou dost not as yet separate my rain from theirs; my light from theirs: separate my cause. Let a difference be made between him who believes in You, and him who believes not in You. Our

infirmity is the same; but our consciences not the same: our sufferings the same; but our longings not the same. The desire of the ungodly shall perish, but as to the desire of the righteous, we might well doubt, if He were not sure who promised. The object of our desires is He Himself, who promises: He will give us Himself, because He has already given Himself to us; He will give Himself in His immortality to us then immortal, even because He gave Himself in His mortality to us when mortal....

3. And since patience is needful in order to endure, until the harvest, a certain distinction without separation, if we may so speak (for they are together with us, and therefore not yet separated; the tares however being still tares, and the grain still grain, and therefore they are already distinct); since then a kind of strength is needful, which must be implored of Him who bids us to be strong, and without whose making us strong, we should not be what He bids us to be; of Him who said, He that endures unto the end shall be saved, Matthew 24:31 lest the soul's powers should be impaired in consequence of her ascribing any strength to herself, he subjoins immediately,

For Thou, O God, art my strength: why have You cast me off, and why go I mourning, while the enemy harasses me? Psalm 42:2. I go mourning: the enemy is harassing me with daily temptations: inspiring either some unlawful love, or some ungrounded cause of fear; and the soul that fights against both of them, though not taken prisoner by them, yet being in danger from them, is contracted with sorrow, and says unto God, Why?

Let her then ask of Him, and hear Why? For she is in the Psalm enquiring the cause of her dejection; saying, Why have You cast me off? And why go I mourning? Let her hear from Isaiah; let the lesson which has just been read, suggest itself to her. The spirit shall go forth from me, and every breath have I made. For iniquity have I a little afflicted him; I hid my face from him, and he departed from me sorrowful in the ways of his heart. Isaiah 57:16-17 Why then did you ask, Why have You cast me off, and why go I mourning? You have heard, it was for iniquity. Iniquity is the cause of your mourning; let Righteousness be the cause of your rejoicing! You would sin; and yet you would fain not suffer; so that it was too little for you to be yourself unrighteous, without also wishing Him to be unrighteous, in that you would fain not be punished by Him. Consider a speech of a better kind in another Psalm. It is good for me that You have humbled me, that I might learn Your righteousnesses. By being lifted up, I had learned my own iniquities; let me by being humbled, learn Your righteousnesses. Why go I mourning, while the enemy harasses me? You complain of the enemy. It is true he does harass you; but it was you who gave place Ephesians 4:27 to him. And even now there is a course open to you; choose the course of prudence; admit your King, shut the tyrant out.

4. But in order that she may do this, hear what she says, what she supplicates, what she prays for. Pray thou for what you hear; pray for it when you hear it; let these words be the voice of us all: O send out Your Light and Your Truth. They have led me, and brought me on unto Your holy hill, and into Your Tabernacles Psalm 42:3. For that very Light and Truth are indeed two in name; the reality expressed is but One. For what else is the Light of God, except the Truth of God? Or what else is the Truth of God, except the Light of God? And the one Person of Christ is both of these. I am the Light of the world: he that believes in Me, shall not walk in darkness. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is Himself the Light: He is Himself the Truth. Let Him come then and rescue us, and separate at once our cause from the ungodly nation; let Him deliver us from the deceitful and unjust man, let him separate the wheat from the tares, for at the time of harvest He will Himself send His Angels, that they may gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, Matthew 13:41 and cast them into flaming fire, while they gather together the grain into the garner. He will send out His Light, and His Truth; for that they have already brought us and led us to His holy hill, and into

His Tabernacles. We possess the earnest; we hope for the prize. His holy Hill is His holy Church. It is that mountain which, according to Daniel's vision, Daniel 2:35 grew from a very small stone, till it crushed the kingdoms of the earth; and grew to such a size, that it filled the face of the earth. This is the hill, from which he tells us that his prayer was heard, who says, I cried unto the Lord with my voice, and He heard me out of His holy hill. Let no one of those that are without that mountain, hope to be heard unto eternal life. For many are heard in their prayers for many things. Let them not congratulate themselves on being heard; the devils were heard in their prayer, that they might be sent into the swine. Let us desire to be heard unto eternal life, by reason of our longing, through which we say, Send out Your Light and Your Truth. Matthew 8:31-32 That is a Light which requires the eye of the heart. For Blessed (He says) are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Matthew 5:8 We are now on His Hill, that is, in His Church, and in His Tabernacle. The tabernacle is for persons sojourning; the house, for those dwelling in one community. The tabernacle is also for those who are both from home, and also in a state of warfare. When you hear of a tabernacle, form a notion of a war; guard against an enemy. But what shall the house be? Blessed are they that dwell in Your house: they will be always praising You.

5. Now then that we have been led on even to the Tabernacle, and are placed on His holy Hill, what hope do we carry with us?

Then will I go in unto the Altar of God Psalm 42:4. For there is a certain invisible Altar on high, which the unrighteous man approaches not. To that Altar he alone draws near, who draws near to this one without cause to fear. There he shall find his Life, who in this one separates his cause. And I will go in unto the Altar of God. From His holy Hill, and from His Tabernacle, from His Holy Church, I will go in unto the Altar of God on High. What manner of Sacrifice is there? He himself who goes in is taken for a burnt-offering. I will go in unto the Altar of God. What is the meaning of what he says, The Altar of my God?

Unto God, who makes glad my youth. Youth signifies newness: just as if he said, Unto God, who makes glad my newness. It is He who makes glad my newness, who has filled my old estate with mourning. For now I go mourning in oldness, then shall I stand, exulting in newness!

Yea, upon the harp will I praise You, O God my God. What is the meaning of praising on the harp, and praising on the psaltery? For he does not always do so with the harp, nor always with the psaltery. These two instruments of the musicians have each a distinct meaning of their own, worthy of our consideration and notice. They are both borne in the hands, and played by the touch; and they stand for certain bodily works of ours. Both are good, if one knows how to play the psaltery, or to play the harp. But since the psaltery is that instrument which has the shell (i.e. that drum, that hollow piece of wood, by straining on which the chords resound) on the upper part of it, whereas the harp has that same concave sounding-board on the lower part, there is to be a distinction made between our works, when they are upon the harp, when on the psaltery: both however are acceptable to God, and grateful to His ear. When we do anything according to God's Commandments, obeying His commands and hearkening to Him, that we may fulfil His injunctions, when we are active and not passive, it is the psaltery that is playing. For so also do the Angels: for they have nothing to suffer. But when we suffer anything of tribulation, of trials, of offenses on this earth (as we suffer only from the inferior part of ourselves; i.e. from the fact that we are mortal, that we owe somewhat of tribulation to our original cause, and also from the fact of our suffering much from those who are not above); this is the harp. For there rises a sweet strain from that part of us which is below: we suffer, and we strike the psaltery, or shall I rather say we sing and we strike the harp....

6. And again, in order that he may draw the sound from that sounding-board below, he addresses his soul: he says, Why are you sorrowful, O my soul, and why do you disquiet me? Psalm 42:5. I am in tribulations, in weariness, in mourning, Why do you disquiet me, O my soul? Who is the speaker, to whom is he speaking? That it is the soul to which he is speaking, everybody knows: for it is obvious: the appeal is addressed to it directly: Why are you sorrowful, O my soul, and why do you disquiet me? The question is as to the speaker. It is not the flesh addressing the soul, surely, since the flesh cannot speak without the soul. For it is more appropriate for the soul to address the flesh, than for the flesh to address the soul....We perceive then that we have a certain part, in which is the image of God; viz. the mind and reason. It was that same mind that prayed for God's Light and God's Truth. It is the same mind by which we apprehend right and wrong: it is by the same that we discern truth from falsehood. It is this same that we call understanding; which understanding, indeed, is wanting to the brutes. And this understanding whoever neglects in himself, and holds it in less account than the other parts of his nature, and casts it off, just as if he had it not, is addressed in the Psalm, Be not as the horse and the mule, which have no understanding. It is our understanding then that is addressing our soul. The latter is withered away from tribulations, worn out in anguish, made sorrowful in temptations, fainting in toils. The mind, catching a glimpse of Truth above, would fain rouse her spirits, and she says, Why are you sorrowful, O my soul?...

7. These expressions, brethren, are safe ones: but yet be watchful in good works. Touch the psaltery, by obeying the Commandments; touch the harp, by patiently enduring your sufferings. You have heard from Isaiah, Break your bread to the hungry; Isaiah 58:7 think not that fasting by itself is sufficient. Fasting chastens your own self: it does not refresh others. Your distress will profit you, if you afford comfort to others. See, you have denied yourself; to whom will you give that of which you have deprived yourself? Where will you bestow what you have denied yourself? How many poor may be filled by the breakfast we have this day given up? Fast in such a way that you may rejoice, that you have breakfasted, while another has been eating; fast on account of your prayers, that you may be heard in them. For He says in that passage, Whilst you are yet speaking I will say, Here I am, provided you will with cheerful mind break your bread to the hungry. For generally this is done by men reluctantly and with murmurs, to rid themselves of the wearisome importunity of the beggar, not to refresh the bowels of him that is needy. But it is a cheerful giver that God loves. 2 Corinthians 9:7 If you give your bread reluctantly, you have lost both the bread, and the merit of the action. Do it then from the heart: that He who sees in secret, Matthew 6:6 may say, while you are yet speaking, Here I am. How speedily are the prayers of those received, who work righteousness! And this is man's righteousness in this life, fasting, alms, and prayer. Would you have your prayer fly upward to God? Make for it those two wings of alms and fasting. Such may God's Light and God's Truth find us, that He may find us without cause for fear, when He comes to free us from death, who has already come to undergo death for us. Amen.

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