

Exposition on Psalm 5

by St. Augustine

The sermon explores the Church's inheritance, God's justice, and the way of truth, highlighting the consequences of ungodliness and the blessing of the just.

Scripture: Psalm 5:1-2, Psalm 5:4, Psalm 5:8-9, Matthew 5:5, John 14:6, Romans 3:23, Romans 8:24, Romans 8:30, 1 John 4:18

Topics: "Church Inheritance", "Gods Justice"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the Psalms, highlighting the Church as the recipient of eternal life through Jesus Christ, signified as God's inheritance. The Psalms express a prayer for the Church to possess God and be blessed, while acknowledging the hindrances of sin and the need for God's mercy. The progression towards perfection is depicted through seeking God's justice, worshiping in fear, and desiring to be led by God. The Psalms also prophesy the fate of the ungodly and the eternal joy of the just who hope in God.

Transcript

1. The title of the Psalm is, For her who receives the inheritance. The Church then is signified, who receives for her inheritance eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ; that she may possess God Himself, in cleaving to whom she may be blessed, according to that, Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the earth. Matthew 5:5 What earth, but that of which it is said, You are my hope, my portion in the land of the living? And again more clearly, The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup. And conversely the word Church is said to be God's inheritance according to that, Ask of Me, and I shall give you the heathen for your inheritance. Therefore is God said to be our inheritance, because He feeds and sustains us: and we are said to be God's inheritance, because He orders and rules us. Wherefore it is the voice of the Church in this Psalm called to her inheritance, that she too may herself become the inheritance of the Lord.

2. Hear my words, O Lord Psalm 5:1. Being called she calls upon the Lord; that the same Lord being her helper, she may pass through the wickedness of this world, and attain unto Him. Understand my cry. The Psalmist well shows what this cry is; how from within, from the chamber of the heart, without the body's utterance, it reaches unto God: for the bodily voice is heard, but the spiritual is understood. Although this too may be God's hearing, not with carnal ear, but in the omnipresence of His Majesty.

3. Attend to the voice of my supplication; that is, to that voice, which he makes request that God would understand: of which what the nature is, he has already intimated, when he said, Understand my cry. Attend to the voice of my supplication, my King, and my God Psalm 5:2. Although both the Son is God, and the Father God, and the Father and the Son together One God; and if asked of the Holy Ghost, we must give no other answer than that He is God; and when the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost are mentioned together, we must understand nothing else, than One God; nevertheless Scripture is wont to give the appellation of King to the Son. According then to that which is said, By Me man comes to the Father, John 14:6 rightly is it first, my King; and then, my God. And yet has not the Psalmist said, Attend You; but, Attend. For the Catholic faith preaches not two or three Gods, but the Very Trinity, One God. Not that the same Trinity can be together, now the Father, now the Son, now the Holy Ghost, as Sabellius believed: but that the Father must be none but the Father, and the Son none but the Son, and the Holy Ghost none but the Holy Ghost, and this Trinity but One God. Hence when the Apostle had said, Of whom are all things, by whom are all things, in whom are all things, Romans 11:36 he is believed to have conveyed an intimation of the Very Trinity; and yet he did not add, to Them be glory; but, to Him be glory.

4. Because I will pray unto You Psalm 5:3. O Lord, in the morning You will hear my voice. What does that, which he said above, Hear Thou, mean, as if he desired to be heard immediately? But now he says, in the morning You will hear; not, hear Thou: and, I will pray unto You; not, I do pray unto You: and, as follows, in the morning I will stand by You, and will see; not, I do stand by You, and do see. Unless perhaps his former prayer marks the invocation itself: but being in darkness amidst the storms of this world, he perceives that he does not see what he desires, and yet does not cease to hope, For hope that is seen, is not hope. Romans 8:24 Nevertheless, he understands why he does not see, because the night is not yet past, that is, the darkness which our sins have merited. He says therefore, Because I will pray unto You, O Lord; that is, because You are so mighty to whom I shall make my prayer, in the morning You will hear my voice. You are not He, he says, that can be seen by those, from whose eyes the night of sins is not yet withdrawn: when the night then of my error is past, and the darkness gone, which by my sins I have brought upon myself, then You will hear my voice. Why then did he say above not, You will hear, but hear Thou? Is it that after the Church cried out, hear Thou, and was not heard, she perceived what must needs pass away to enable her to be heard? Or is it that she was heard above, but does not yet understand that she was heard, because she does not yet see by whom she has been heard; and what she now says, In the morning You will hear, she would have thus taken, In the morning I shall understand that I have been heard? Such is that expression, Arise, O Lord, that is, make me arise. But this latter is taken of Christ's resurrection: but at all events that Scripture, The Lord your God proves you, that He may know whether ye love Him, Deuteronomy 13:3 cannot be taken in any other sense, than, that you by Him may know, and that it may be made evident to yourselves, what progress you have made in His love.

5. In the morning I will stand by You, and will see Psalm 5:3. What is, I will stand, but I will not lie down? Now what else is, to lie down, but to take rest on the earth, which is a seeking happiness in earthly pleasures? I will stand by, he says, and will see. We must not then cleave to things earthly, if we would see God, who is beheld by a clean heart. For You are not a God who hast pleasure in iniquity. The malignant man shall not dwell near You, nor shall the unrighteous abide before Your eyes. You have hated all that work iniquity, You will destroy all that speak a lie. The man of blood, and the crafty man, the Lord will abominate Psalm 5:4-6. Iniquity, malignity, lying, homicide, craft, and all the like, are the night of which we speak: on the passing away of which, the morning dawns, that God may be seen. He has unfolded the reason, then, why he will stand by in the morning, and see: For, he says, You are not a God who hast pleasure in iniquity. For if He were a God who had pleasure in iniquity, He could be seen even by

the iniquitous, so that He would not be seen in the morning, that is, when the night of iniquity is over.

6. The malignant man shall not dwell near You: that is, he shall not so see, as to cleave to You. Hence follows, Nor shall the unrighteous abide before Your eyes. For their eyes, that is, their mind is beaten back by the light of truth, because of the darkness of their sins; by the habitual practice of which they are not able to sustain the brightness of right understanding. Therefore even they who see sometimes, that is, who understand the truth, are yet still unrighteous, they abide not therein through love of those things, which turn away from the truth. For they carry about with them their night, that is, not only the habit, but even the love, of sinning. But if this night shall pass away, that is, if they shall cease to sin, and this love and habit thereof be put to flight, the morning dawns, so that they not only understand, but also cleave to the truth.

7. You have hated all that work iniquity. God's hatred may be understood from that form of expression, by which every sinner hates the truth. For it seems that she too hates those, whom she suffers not to abide in her. Now they do not abide, who cannot bear the truth. You will destroy all that speak a lie. For this is the opposite to truth. But lest any one should suppose that any substance or nature is opposite to truth, let him understand that a lie has relation to that which is not, not to that which is.

For if that which is to be spoken, truth is spoken: but if that which is not to be spoken, it is a lie. Therefore says he, You will destroy all that speak a lie; because drawing back from that which is, they turn aside to that which is not. Many lies indeed seem to be for some one's safety or advantage, spoken not in malice, but in kindness: such was that of those midwives in Exodus, Exodus 1:19 who gave a false report to Pharaoh, to the end that the infants of the children of Israel might not be slain.

But even these are praised not for the fact, but for the disposition shown; since those who only lie in this way, will attain in time to a freedom from all lying. For in those that are perfect, not even these lies are found. For to these it is said, Let there be in your mouth, yea, yea; nay, nay; whatsoever is more, is of evil. Matthew 5:37 Nor is it without reason written in another place, The mouth that lies slays the soul: Wisdom 1:11 lest any should imagine that the perfect and spiritual man ought to lie for this temporal life, in the death of which no soul is slain, neither his own, nor another's.

But since it is one thing to lie, another to conceal the truth (if indeed it be one thing to say what is false, another not to say what is true), if haply one does not wish to give a man up even to this visible death, he should be prepared to conceal what is true, not to say what is false; so that he may neither give him up, nor yet lie, lest he slay his own soul for another's body. But if he cannot yet do this, let him at all events admit only lies of such necessity, that he may attain to be freed even from these, if they alone remain, and receive the strength of the Holy Ghost, whereby he may despise all that must be suffered for the truth's sake.

In fine, there are two kinds of lies, in which there is no great fault, and yet they are not without fault, either when we are in jest, or when we lie that we may do good. That first kind, in jest, is for this reason not very hurtful, because there is no deception. For he to whom it is said knows that it is said for the sake of the jest. But the second kind is for this reason the more inoffensive, because it carries with it some kindly intention. And to say truth, that which has no duplicity, cannot even be called a lie.

As if, for example, a sword be entrusted to any one, and he promises to return it, when he who entrusted it to him shall demand it: if he chance to require his sword when in a fit of madness, it is clear it must not be returned then, lest he kill either himself or others, until soundness of mind be restored to him. Here then is

no duplicity, because he, to whom the sword was entrusted, when he promised that he would return it at the other's demand, did not imagine that he could require it when in a fit of madness.

But even the Lord concealed the truth, when He said to the disciples, not yet strong enough, I have many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now: John 16:12 and the Apostle Paul when he said, I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal. 1 Corinthians 3:1 Whence it is clear that it is not blamable, sometimes not to speak what is true. But to say what is false is not found to have been allowed to the perfect.

8. The man of blood, and the crafty man, the Lord will abominate. What he said above, You have hated all that work iniquity, You will destroy all that speak a lie, may well seem to be repeated here: so that one may refer the man of blood to the worker of iniquity, and the crafty man to the lie. For it is craft, when one thing is done, another pretended. He used an apt word too, when he said, will abominate. For the disinherited are usually called abominated. Now this Psalm is, for her who receives the inheritance; and she adds the exulting joy of her hope, in saying, But I, in the multitude of Your mercy, will enter into Your house Psalm 5:7. In the multitude of mercy: perhaps he means in the multitude of perfected and blessed men, of whom that city shall consist, of which the Church is now in travail, and is bearing few by few. Now that many men regenerated and perfected, are rightly called the multitude of God's mercy, who can deny; when it is most truly said, What is man that You are mindful of him, or the son of man that You visit him? I will enter into Your house: as a stone into a building, I suppose, is the meaning. For what else is the house of God than the Temple of God, of which it is said, for the temple of God is holy, 1 Corinthians 3:17 which temple you are? Of which building He is the cornerstone, Ephesians 2:20 whom the Power and Wisdom of God coeternal with the Father assumed.

9. I will worship at Your holy temple, in Your fear. At the temple, we understand as, near the temple. For he does not say, I will worship in Your holy temple; but, I will worship at Your holy temple. It must be understood too to be spoken not of perfection, but of progress toward perfection: so that the words, I will enter into Your house, should signify perfection. But that this may come to a happy issue, I will first, he says, worship at Your holy temple. And perhaps on this account he added, in Your fear; which is a great defence to those that are advancing toward salvation. But when any one shall have arrived there, in him comes to pass that which is written, perfect love casts out fear. 1 John 4:18 For they do not fear Him who is now their friend, to whom it is said, henceforth I will not call you servants, but friends, John 15:15 when they have been brought through to that which was promised.

10. O Lord, lead me forth in Your justice because of mine enemies Psalm 5:8. He has here sufficiently plainly declared that he is on his onward road, that is, in progress toward perfection, not yet in perfection itself, when he desires eagerly that he may be led forth. But, in Your justice, not in that which seems so to men. For to return evil for evil seems justice: but it is not His justice of whom it is said, He makes His sun to rise on the good and on the evil: for even when God punishes sinners, He does not inflict His evil on them, but leaves them to their own evil. Behold, the Psalmist says, he travailed with injustice, he has conceived toil, and brought forth iniquity: he has opened a ditch, and dug it, and has fallen into the pit which he wrought: his pains shall be turned on his own head, and his iniquity shall descend on his own pate. When then God punishes, He punishes as a judge those that transgress the law, not by bringing evil upon them from Himself, but driving them on to that which they have chosen, to fill up the sum of their misery. But man, when he returns evil for evil, does it with an evil will: and on this account is himself first evil, when he would punish evil.

11. Direct in Your sight my way. Nothing is clearer, than that he here sets forth that time, in which he is journeying onward. For this is a way which is traversed not in any regions of the earth, but in the affections of the heart. In Your sight, he says, direct my way: that is, where no man sees; who are not to be trusted in their praise or blame. For they can in no wise judge of another man's conscience, wherein the way toward God is traversed. Hence it is added, for truth is not in their mouth Psalm 5:9. To whose judgment of course then there is no trusting, and therefore must we fly within to conscience, and the sight of God. Their heart is vain. How then can truth be in their mouth, whose heart is deceived by sin, and the punishment of sin? Whence men are called back by that voice, Wherefore do ye love vanity, and seek a lie?

12. Their throat is an open sepulchre. It may be referred to signify gluttony, for the sake of which men very often lie by flattery. And admirably has he said, an open sepulchre: for this gluttony is ever gaping with open mouth, not as sepulchres, which, on the reception of corpses, are closed up. This also may be understood hereby, that with lying and blind flattery men draw to themselves those whom they entice to sin; and as it were devour them, when they turn them to their own way of living. And when this happens to them, since by sin they die, those by whom they are led along, are rightly called open sepulchres: for themselves too are in a manner lifeless, being destitute of the life of truth; and they take in to themselves dead men, whom having slain by lying words and a vain heart, they turn unto themselves. With their own tongues they dealt craftily: that is, with evil tongues. For this seems to be signified, when he says their own. For the evil have evil tongues, that is, they speak evil, when they speak craftily. To whom the Lord says, How can you, being evil, speak good things? Matthew 12:34

13. Judge them, O God: let them fall from their own thoughts Psalm 5:10. It is a prophecy, not a curse. For he does not wish that it should come to pass; but he perceives what will come to pass. For this happens to them, not because he appears to have wished for it, but because they are such as to deserve that it should happen. For so also what he says afterwards, Let all that hope in You rejoice, he says by way of prophecy; since he perceives that they will rejoice. Likewise is it said prophetically, Stir up Your strength, and come: for he saw that He would come. Although the words, Let them fall from their own thoughts, may be taken thus also, that it may rather be believed to be a wish for their good by the Psalmist, while they fall from their evil thoughts, that is, that they may no more think evil. But what follows, drive them out, forbids this interpretation. For it can in no way be taken in a favourable sense, that one is driven out by God. Wherefore it is understood to be said prophetically, and not of ill will; when this is said, which must necessarily happen to such as chose to persevere in those sins, which have been mentioned. Let them, therefore, fall from their own thoughts, is, let them fall by their self-accusing thoughts, their own conscience also bearing witness, as the Apostle says, and their thoughts accusing or excusing, in the revelation of the just judgment of God. Romans 2:15-16

14. According to the multitude of their ungodlinesses drive them out: that is, drive them out far away. For this is according to the multitude of their ungodlinesses, that they should be driven out far away. The ungodly then are driven out from that inheritance, which is possessed by knowing and seeing God: as diseased eyes are driven out from the shining of the light, when what is gladness to others is pain to them. Therefore these shall not stand in the morning, and see. And that expression is as great a punishment, as that which is said, But for me it is good to cleave to the Lord, is a great reward. To this punishment is opposed, Enter into the joy of Your Lord; Matthew 25:21 for similar to this expulsion is, Cast him into outer darkness. Matthew 25:30

15. Since they have embittered You, O Lord: I am, says He, the Bread which came down from heaven; John 6:51 again, Labour for the meat which wastes not; John 6:27 again, Taste and see that the Lord is

sweet. But to sinners the bread of truth is bitter. Whence they hate the mouth of him that speaks the truth. These then have embittered God, who by sin have fallen into such a state of sickness, that the food of truth, in which healthy souls delight, as if it were bitter as gall, they cannot bear.

16. And let all rejoice that hope in You; those of course to whose taste the Lord is sweet. They will exult for evermore, and You will dwell in them Psalm 5:11. This will be the exultation for evermore, when the just become the Temple of God, and He, their Indweller, will be their joy. And all that love Your name shall glory in You: as when what they love is present for them to enjoy. And well is it said, in You, as if in possession of the inheritance, of which the title of the Psalm speaks: when they too are His inheritance, which is intimated by, You will dwell in them. From which good they are kept back, whom God, according to the multitude of their ungodlinesses, drives out.

17. For You will bless the just man Psalm 5:12. This is blessing, to glory in God, and to be inhabited by God. Such sanctification is given to the just. But that they may be justified, a calling goes before: which is not of merit, but of the grace of God. For all have sinned, and want the glory of God. Romans 3:23 For whom He called, them He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified. Romans 8:30 Since then calling is not of our merit, but of the goodness and mercy of God, he went on to say, O Lord, as with the shield of Your good will You have crowned us. For God's good will goes before our good will, to call sinners to repentance. And these are the arms whereby the enemy is overcome, against whom it is said, Who will bring accusation against God's elect? Again, if God be for us, who can be against us? Who spared not His Only Son, but delivered Him up for us all. For if, when we were enemies, Christ died for us; much more being reconciled shall we be saved from wrath through Him. Romans 5:10 This is that unconquerable shield, whereby the enemy is driven back, when he suggests despair of our salvation through the multitude of tribulations and temptations.

18. The whole contents of the Psalm, then, are a prayer that she may be heard, from the words, hear my words, O Lord, unto, my King, and my God. Then follows a view of those things which hinder the sight of God, that is, a knowledge that she is heard, from the words, because I shall pray unto You, O Lord, in the morning You will hear my voice, unto, the man of blood and the crafty man the Lord will abominate. Thirdly, she hopes that she, who is to be the house of God, even now begins to draw near to Him in fear, before that perfection which casts out fear, from the words, but I in the multitude of Your mercy, unto, I will worship at Your holy temple in Your fear. Fourthly, as she is progressing and advancing among those very things which she feels to hinder her, she prays that she may be assisted within, where no man sees, lest she be turned aside by evil tongues, for the words, O Lord, lead me forth in Your justice because of my enemies, unto, with their tongues they dealt craftily. Fifthly, is a prophecy of what punishment awaits the ungodly, when the just man shall scarcely be saved; and of what reward the just shall obtain, who, when they were called, came, and bore all things manfully, till they were brought to the end, from the words, judge them, O God, unto the end of the Psalm.

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