

Exposition on Psalm 52

by St. Augustine

St. Augustine's exposition on Psalm 52 contrasts the fate of the wicked with the hope and steadfastness of the righteous in their faith in God.

Scripture: Psalm 34:8, Psalm 52:7, Psalm 52:9, Romans 4:5

Topics: "Trust In God", "Kingdom Living"

Description

St. Augustine preaches about the contrast between those who trust in earthly riches and those who trust in the mercy of God for everlasting life. He emphasizes the importance of rooting oneself in the love of the kingdom of heaven and confessing to God's mercy rather than boasting in one's own achievements. The sermon delves into the concept of fearing and laughing in different contexts, urging believers to fear in humility and rejoice in the ultimate triumph of righteousness. St. Augustine highlights the pleasantness of seeking God's name and the need to taste and experience His goodness to truly understand its sweetness.

Transcript

The title of the Psalm hath: "At the end, understanding of David, when there came Doeg the Edomite arid told Saul, David hath come into the house of Abimelech:" whereas we read that he had come into the house of Achimelech. And it may chance that we do not unreasonably suppose, that because of the similarity of a name and the difference of one syllable, or rather of one letter, the titles have been varied. In the manuscripts, however, of the Psalms, when we looked into them, rather Abimelech we have found than Achimelech. And since in another place thou hast a most evident Psalm, intimating not a dissimilarity of name, but an utterly different name; when, for instance, David changed his face before King Achish, not before king Abimelech, and he sent him away, and he departed: and yet the title of the Psalm is thus written, "When he changed his countenance in the presence of Abimelech"--the very change of name maketh us the rather intent upon a mystery, lest thou shouldest pursue the quasi-facts of history, and despise the sacred veilings.

Observe ye two kinds of men; the one of men labouring, the other of those among whom they labour: the one of men thinking of earth, the other of heaven: the one of men weighing down their heart unto the deep, the other of men with Angels their heart conjoining: the one trusting in earthly things, wherein this world aboundeth, the other confiding in heavenly things, which God, who lieth not, hath promised. But mingled are these kinds of men. We see now the citizen of Jerusalem, citizen of the kingdom of heaven,

have some office upon earth: to wit, one weareth purple, is a Magistrate, is AEdile, is Proconsul, is Emperor, doth direct the earthly republic: but he hath his heart above, if he is a Christian, if he is a believer, if he is godly, if he is despising those things wherein he is, and trusteth in that wherein he is not yet. Of which kind was that holy woman Esther, who, though she was wife of a king, incurred the danger of interceding for her countrymen: and when she was praying before God, where she could not lie, in her prayer said, that her royal ornaments were to her but as the cloth of a menstruous woman. Despair we not then of the citizens of the kingdom of heaven, when we see them engaged in any of Babylon's matters, doing something earthly in republic earthly: nor again let us forthwith congratulate all men that we see doing matters heavenly; because even the sons of pestilence sit sometimes in the seat of Moses, of whom is said, "What things they say, do ye: but what things they do, do not: for they say, and do not." Those, amid earthly things, lift up heart unto heaven, these, amid heavenly words, trail heart upon earth. But there will come time of winnowing, when both are to be severed with greatest diligence, in order that no grain may pass over unto the heap of chaff that is to be burned, that not one single straw may pass over to the mass that is to be stored in the barn. So long as then now it is mingled, hear we thence our voice, that is, voice of the citizens of the kingdom of heaven (for to this we ought to aspire, to bear with evil men here, rather than be borne with by good men): and let us conjoin ourselves to this voice, both with ear and with tongue, and with heart and work. Which if we shall have done, we are here speaking in those things which we hear. Let us therefore speak first of the evil body of kingdom earthly.

"Why doth he glory in malice that is mighty?" (ver. 1). Observe, my brethren, the glorying of malignity, the glorying of evil men. Where is glorying? "Why doth he glory in malice that is mighty?" That is, he that in malice is mighty, why doth he glory? There is need that a man be mighty, but in goodness, not in malice. Is it any great thing to glory in malice? To build a house doth belong to few men, any ignorant man you please can pull down. To sow wheat, to dress the crop, to wait until it ripen, and in that fruit on which one has laboured to rejoice, doth belong to few men: with one spark any man you please can burn all the crop. To breed an infant, when born to feed him, to educate, to bring him on to youth's estate, is a great task: to kill him in one moment of time any one you please is able. Therefore those things which are done for destruction, are most easily done. "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord: " he that glorieth, let him glory in goodness. Thou gloriest, because thou art mighty in evil. What art thou about to do, O mighty man, what art thou about to do, boasting thyself much? Thou art about to kill a man: this thing also a scorpion, this also one fever, this also a poisonous fungus can do. To this is thy mightiness reduced, that it be made equal to a poisonous fungus? This therefore do the good citizens of Jerusalem, who not in malice but in goodness glory: firstly, that not in themselves, but in the Lord they glory. Secondly, that those things which make for edification they earnestly do, and do such things as are strong to abide: but things which make for destruction they may do, for the discipline of men advancing, not for the oppression of the innocent. To this mightiness then that earthly body being compared, why may it not hear out of these words, "Why doth he glory in malice that is mighty?"

"In iniquity the whole day upon injustice hath thy tongue thought" (ver. 2): that is, in the whole of time, without weariness, without intermission, without cessation. And when thou doest not, thou thinkest; so that when anything of evil is away from thy hands, from thy heart it is not away; either thou doest an evil thing, or while thou canst not do, thou sayest an evil thing, that is, thou evil-speakest: or when not even this thou canst do, thou wiliest and thinkest an evil thing. "The whole day," then, that is, without intermission. We expect punishment to this man. Is he to himself a small punishment? Thou threatenest him: thou, when thou threatenest him, wilt send him whither? Unto evil? Send him away unto himself. In order that thou mayest vent much rage, thou art going to give him into the power of beasts: unto himself he is worse than

beasts. For a beast can mangle his body: of himself he cannot leave his heart whole. Within, against himself he doth rage of himself, and dost thou from without seek for stripes? Nay, pray God for him, that he may be set free from himself. Nevertheless in this Psalm, my brethren, there is not a prayer for evil men, or against evil men, but a prophecy of what is to result to evil men. Think not therefore that the Psalm of ill-will saith anything: for it is said in the spirit of prophecy.

There followeth then what? All thy might and all thy thought of iniquity all the day, and meditation of malignity in thy tongue without intermission, hath performed what, done what? "As with a sharp razor thou hast done deceit" (ver. 3). See what do evil men to Saints, they scrape their hair. What is it that I have said? If there be such citizens of Jerusalem, that hear the voice of their Lord, of their King, saying, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul:" that hear the voice which but now from the Gospel hath been read, "What doth it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and of himself make wreck:" they despise all present good things, and above all life itself. And what is Doeg's razor to do to a man on this earth meditating on the kingdom of heaven, and about to be in the kingdom of heaven, having with him God, and about to abide with God? What is that razor to do? Hair it is to scrape, it is to make a man bald. And this belongeth to Christ, who in the Place of a Skull was crucified. It maketh also the son of Core, which is interpreted baldness. For this hair signifieth a superfluity of things temporal. Which hairs indeed are not made by God superfluously on the body of men, but for a sort of ornament: yet because without feeling they are cut off, they that cleave to the Lord with their heart, so have these earthly things as they have hair. But sometimes even something of good with "hair" is wrought, when thou breakest bread to the hungry, the poor without roof thou bringest into thy house; if thou shalt have seen one naked, thou coverest him: lastly, the Martyrs themselves also imitating the Lord, blood for the Church shedding, hearing that voice, "As Christ laid down His life for us, so also ought we also to lay down for the brethren," in a certain way with their hair did good to us, that is, with those things which that razor can lop off or scrape. But that therefore even with the very hair some good can be done, even that woman a sinner intimated, who, when she had wept over the feet of the Lord, with her hair wiped what with tears she wetted? Signifying what? That when thou shalt have pitied any one, thou oughtest to relieve him also if thou canst. For when thou hast pity, thou sheddest as it were tears: when thou relievest, thou wipest with hair. And if this to any one, how much more to the feet of the Lord. The feet of the Lord are what? The holy Evangelists, whereof is said, "How beautiful are the feet of them that tell of peace, that tell of good things!" Therefore like a razor let Doeg whet his tongue, let him whet deceit as much as he may: he will take away superfluous temporal things; will he necessary things everlasting?

"Thou hast loved malice above benignity" (ver. 4). Before thee was benignity; herself thou shouldst have loved. For thou wast not going to expend anything, nor wast thou going to fetch something to love by a distant voyage. Benignity is before thee, iniquity before thee: compare and choose. But perchance thou hast an eye wherewith thou seest malignity, and hast no eye wherewith thou seest benignity. Woe to the iniquitous heart. What is worse, it doth turn away itself, that it may not see what it is able to see. For what of such hath been said in another place? "He would not understand that he might do good." For it is not said, he could not: but "he would not," he saith, "understand that he might do good," he closed his eyes from present light. And what followeth? "Of iniquity he hath meditated in his bed;" that is, in the inner secrecy of his heart. Some reproach of this kind is heaped upon this Doeg the Edomite, a malignant body, a motion of earth, not abiding, not heavenly. "Thou hast loved malignity above benignity." For wilt thou know how an evil man doth see both, and the former he doth rather choose, from the other doth turn himself away? Wherefore doth he cry out when he suffereth anything unjustly? Wherefore doth he then exaggerate as much as he can the iniquity, and praise benignity, censuring him that hath wrought in him

malignity above benignity? Be he then a rule to himself for seeing: out of himself he shall be judged. Moreover, if he do what is written, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself;" and, "Whatsoever good things ye will that men should do unto you, these also do ye do unto them:" at home he hath means of knowing, because what on himself he will not have to be done, he ought not to do to another. "Thou hast loved malice above benignity." Iniquitously, inordinately, perversely thou wouldst raise water above oil: the water will be sunk, the oil will remain above. Thou wouldst under darkness place a light: the darkness will be put to flight, the light will remain. Above heaven thou wouldst place earth, by its weight the earth will fall into its place. Thou therefore wilt be sunk by loving malice above benignity. For never will malice overcome benignity. "Thou hast loved malice above benignity: iniquity more than to speak of equity." Before thee is equity, before thee is iniquity: one tongue thou hast, whither thou wilt thou turnest it: wherefore then rather to iniquity and not to equity? Food of bitterness dost thou not give to thy belly, and food of iniquity dost thou give to thy malignant tongue? As thou chooseth whereon to live, so choose what thou mayest speak. Thou preferrest iniquity to equity, and preferrest malice to benignity; thou indeed preferrest, but above what can ever He but benignity and equity? But thou, by placing thyself in a manner upon those things which it is necessary should go beneath, wilt not make them to be above good things, but thou with them wilt be sunk unto evil things.

Because of this there followeth in the Psalm, "Thou hast loved all words of sinking under" (ver. 5). Rescue therefore thyself, if thou canst, from sinking 'under. From shipwreck thou art fleeing, and dost embrace lead! If thou wilt not sink, catch at a plank, be borne on wood, let the Cross carry thee through. But now because thou art a Doeg the Edomite, a "motion," and "of earth," thou doest what? "Thou hast loved all words of sinking-under, a tongue deceitful." This hath preceded, words of sinking-under have followed a tongue deceitful. What is a tongue deceitful? A minister of guile is a tongue deceitful, of men bearing one thing in heart, another thing from mouth bringing forth. But in these is overthrowing, in these sinking under.

"Wherefore God shall destroy thee at the end" (ver. 6): though now thou seemest to flourish like grass in the field before the heat of the sun. For, "All flesh is grass, and the brightness of man as the bloom of grass: the grass hath withered, and the bloom hath fallen down: but the word of the Lord abideth for everlasting." Behold that to which thou mayest bind thyself, to what "abideth for everlasting." For if to grass, and to the bloom of grass, thou shalt have bound thyself, since the grass shall wither, and the bloom shall fall down, "God shall destroy thee at the end: "and if not now, certainly at the end He shall destroy, when that winnowing shall have come, and the heap of chaff from the solid grain shall have been separated. Is not the solid grain for the barns, and the chaff for the fire? Shall not the whole of that Doeg stand at the left hand, when the Lord is to say, "Go ye into fire everlasting, which hath been prepared for the devil and his angels"? Therefore "God shall destroy at the end: shall pluck thee out, and shall remove thee from thy dwelling." Now then this Doeg the Edomite is in a dwelling: "But a servant abideth not in the house for ever." Even he worketh something of good, even if not with his doings, at least with the words of God, so that in the Church, when he "seeketh his own," he would say, at least, those things which are of Christ.

"But He shall remove thee from thy dwelling." "Verily, verily, I say unto you, they have received their reward." "And thy root from the land of the living." Therefore in the land of the living we ought to have root. Be our root there. Out of sight is the root: fruits may be seen, root cannot be seen. Our root is our love, our fruits are our works: it is needful that thy works proceed from love, then is thy root in the land of the living. Then shall be rooted up that Doeg, nor any wise shall he be able there to abide, because neither more deeply there hath he fixed a root: but it shall be with him in like manner as it is with those seeds on the

rock, which even if a root they throw out, yet, because moisture they have not, with the risen sun forthwith do wither. But, on the other hand, they that fix a root more deeply, hear from the Apostle what? "I bow my knees for you to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye may be in love rooted and grounded." And because there now is root, "That ye may be able," he saith, "to comprehend what is the height, and breadth, and length, and depth: to know also the super-eminent knowledge of the love of Christ, that ye may be filled unto all the fulness of God." Of such fruits so great a root is worthy, being so single, so budding, for buddings so deeply grounded. But truly this man's root shall be rooted up from the land of the living.

"And the just shall see, and shall fear; and over him they shall laugh" (ver. 7). Shall fear when? Shall laugh when? Let us therefore understand, and make a distinction between those two times of fearing and laughing, which have their several uses. For so long as we are in this world, not yet must we laugh, lest hereafter we mourn. We have read what is reserved at the end for this Doeg, we have read and because we understand and believe, we see but fear. This, therefore, hath been said, "The just shall see, and shall fear." So long as we see what will result at the end to evil men, wherefore do we fear? Because the Apostle hath said, "In fear and trembling work out your own salvation:" because it hath been said in a Psalm, "Serve the Lord in fear, and exult unto Him with trembling." Wherefore "with fear"? "Wherefore let him that thinketh himself to stand, see that he fall not." Wherefore "with trembling"? Because he saith in another place: "Brethren, if a man shall have been overtaken in any delinquency, ye that are spiritual instruct such sort in the spirit of gentleness; heeding thyself, lest thou also be tempted." Therefore, the just that are now, that live of faith, so see this Doeg, what to him is to result, that nevertheless they fear also for themselves: for what they are to-day, they know; what to-morrow they are to be, they know not. Now, therefore, "The just shall see, and they shall fear." But when shall they laugh? When iniquity shall have passed over; when it shall have flown over; as now to a great degree hath flown over the time uncertain; when shall have been put to flight the darkness of this world, wherein now we walk not but by the lamp of the Scriptures, and therefore fear as though in night. For we walk by prophecy; whereof saith the Apostle Peter, "We have a more sure prophetic word, to which giving heed ye do well, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day shine, and the day-star arise in your hearts." So long then as by a lamp we walk, it is needful that with fear we should live. But when shall have come our day, that is, the manifestation of Christ, whereof the same Apostle saith, "When Christ shall have appeared, your life, then ye also shall appear with Himself in glory," then the just shall laugh at that Doeg

But what shall they then say that shall laugh? "And over him they shall laugh; and shall say, Behold a man that hath not set God for his helper" (ver. 8). See ye the body earthly! "As much as thou shalt have, so great shalt thou be," is a proverb of covetous men, of grasping men, of men oppressing the innocent, of men seizing upon other men's goods, of men denying things entrusted to their care. Of what sort is this proverb? "As much as thou shalt have, so great shalt thou be;" that is, as much as thou shall have had of money, as much as thou shalt have gotten, by so much the more mighty shall thou be.

"Behold a man that hath not set God for his helper, but hath trusted in the multitude of his riches." Let not a poor man, one perchance that is evil, say, I am not of this body. For he hath heard the Prophet saying, "He hath trusted in the multitude of his riches:" forthwith if he is poor, he heedeth his rags, he hath observed near him perchance a rich man among the people of God more richly apparelled, and he saith in his heart, Of this man he speaketh; doth he speak of me?

Do not thence except thyself, do not separate thyself, unless thou shalt have seen and feared, in order that thou mayest hereafter laugh. For what doth it profit thee, if thou dost want means, and thou burnest

with cupidity? When our Lord Jesus Christ to that rich man that was grieved, and that was departing from Him, had said, "Go, sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shall have treasure in heaven, and come follow Me:" and great hopelessness for rich men foretold, so that He said, more easily could a camel pass through the eye of a needle, than a rich man enter into the kingdom of Heaven, were not forthwith the disciples grieved, saying with themselves, "Who shall be able to be saved?"

Therefore when they were saying, "Who shall be able to be saved?" did they think of the few rich men, did there escape them so great a multitude of poor men? Could they not say to themselves, If it is hard, aye an impossible thing, that rich men should enter into the kingdom of heaven, as it is impossible that a camel should enter through the eye of a needle, let all poor men enter into the kingdom of heaven, be the rich alone shut out? For how few are the rich men? But of poor men are thousands innumerable.

For not the coats are we to look upon in the kingdom of heaven; but for every one's garment shall be reckoned the effulgence of righteousness: there shall be therefore poor men equal to Angels of God, clothed with the stoles of immortality, they shall shine as the sun in the kingdom of their Father: what reason is there for us about a few rich men to be concerned, or distressed? This thought not the Apostles; but when the Lord had spoken this, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven:" they saying to themselves, "Who shall be able to be saved," meant what?

Not means, but desires; for they saw even poor men themselves, even if not having money, yet to have covetousness. And that ye may know, that not money in a rich man, but covetousness is condemned, attend to what I say; Thou observest that rich man standing near thee, and perchance in him is money, and is not covetousness; in thee is not money, and is covetousness. A poor man full of sores, full of woe, licked by dogs, having no help, having no morsel, not having perchance a mere garment, was borne by the Angels unto Abraham's bosom.

Ho! being a poor man, art thou glad now; for are even sores by thee to be desired? Is not thy patrimony soundness? There is not in this Lazarus the merit of poverty, but that of godliness. For thou seest who was borne up, thou seest not whither he was borne up. Who was borne up by Angels? A poor man, full of woe, full of sores. Whither was he borne up? Unto Abraham's bosom. Read the Scriptures, and thou shall find Abraham to have been a rich man. In order that thou mayest know, that not riches are blamed; Abraham had much gold, silver, cattle, household, was a rich man, and unto his bosom Lazarus, a poor man, was borne up. Unto bosom of rich man, poor man: are not rather both unto God rich men, both in cupidity poor men? . . .

Therefore that man having been condemned that "hath trusted in the multitude of his riches, and hath prevailed in his vanity:" for what more vain, than he that thinketh coin more to avail than God? Therefore that man having been condemned that said, blessed of the people to whom these things are: thou that sayest, "Blessed the people of whom is the Lord their own God," dost think of thyself what? dost hope for thyself what? "But I;" now at length hear that body: "But I am like an olive, fruit-bearing in the house of God" (ver. 9). Not one man speaketh, but that olive fruit-bearing, whence have been pruned the proud branches, and the humble wild olive grafted in. "Like an olive, fruit-bearing in the house of God, I have trusted in the mercy of God." He did what? "In the multitude of his riches:" therefore his root shall be plucked out from the land of the living. "But I," because "like an olive, fruit-bearing in the house of God," the root whereof is nourished, is not rooted out, "have trusted in the mercy of God." But perchance now? For even herein men err sometimes. God indeed they worship, and are not now like to that Doeg: but

though on God they rely, it is for temporal things nevertheless; so that they say to themselves, I Worship my God, who will make me rich upon earth, who to me will give sons, who to me will give a wife. Such things indeed giveth none but God, but God would not have Himself for the sake of such things to be loved. For to this end oftentimes those things He giveth even to evil men, in order that some other thing good men of Him may learn to seek. In what manner then sayest thou, "I have trusted in the mercy of God"? Perchance for obtaining temporal things? Nay but, "For everlasting and world without end." The expression, "For everlasting," he willed to repeat by adding, "world without end," in order that by there repeating he might affirm how rooted he was in the love of the kingdom of heaven, and in the hope of everlasting felicity.

"I will confess to Thee for ever, because Thou hast done" (ver. 10). "Hast done what?" Doeg Thou hast condemned, David Thou hast crowned. "I will confess to Thee for ever, because Thou hast done." Great confession, "Because thou hast done"! "Hast done" what? except these very things which above have been spoken of, that like an olive fruit-bearing in the house of God, I should trust in the mercy of God for everlasting and world without end? Thou hast done: an ungodly man cannot justify himself. But who is He that justifieth?

"Believing," he saith, "on Him" that justifieth "the ungodly." "For what hast thou which thou hast not received? But if thou hast received, why dost thou glory as if thou hast not received, as if of thyself thou hast?" Be it far from me that I should so glory, saith he, that is opposed against Doeg, that beareth with Doeg upon earth, until he remove from his dwelling, and be rooted up from the land of the living. I glory not as if I have not received, but in God I glory. "And I will confess to Thee because Thou hast done," that is, because Thou hast done not according to my merits, but according to Thy mercy. But I have done what? If thou recollectest, "Before, I was a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious." But thou, what hast thou done? "But mercy I have obtained, because ignorant I did it." "I will confess to Thee for ever, because Thou hast done."

"And I will look for Thy name, for it is pleasant." Bitter is the world, but Thy name is pleasant. Even if certain sweet things are in the world, yet with bitterness they are digested. Thy name is preferred, not only for greatness but also for pleasantness. "For unjust men have told to me their delights, but it is not as Thy law, O Lord." For if there were nothing sweet to the Martyrs, they would not have suffered with equanimity so great bitterness of tribulations. Their bitterness by any one was experienced, their sweetness easily could no one taste. The name of God therefore is pleasant to men loving God above all pleasantnesses. "I will look for Thy name, for it is pleasant." And to what dost Thou prove that it is pleasant? Give me a palate to which it is pleasant. Praise honey as much as thou art able, exaggerate the sweetness thereof with what words thou shalt have the power: a man knowing not what honey is, unless he shall have tasted, what thou sayest knoweth not. Therefore the rather to the proof the Psalm inviting thee saith what? "Taste and see that sweet is the Lord." Taste thou wilt not, and thou sayest, Is it pleasant? What is pleasant? If thou hast tasted, in thy fruit be it found, not in words alone, as it were only in leaves, lest by the curse of the Lord, to wither like that fig-tree thou shouldest deserve. "Taste," he saith, "and see, that sweet is the Lord." Taste and see: then ye shall see, if ye shall have tasted. But to a man not tasting, how provest thou? By praising the pleasantness of the name of God, whatsoever things thou shall have said are words: something else is taste. The words of His praise there hear even the ungodly, but none taste how sweet it is, but the Saints. Further, a man discerning the sweetness of the name of God, and wishing to unfold and wishing to show the same, and not finding persons to whom he may unfold it; for to the Saints there is no need that he show it, because they even of themselves taste and know, but the ungodly cannot discern

what they will not taste: doth, I say, what, because of the sweetness' of the name of God? He hath borne him forthwith away from the crowds of the ungodly. "And I will look," he saith, "for Thy name, for it is pleasant, in the sight of Thy Saints." Pleasant is Thy name, but not in the sight of the ungodly. I know how sweet a thing it is, but it is to them that have tasted.

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