

Exposition on Psalm 54

by St. Augustine

The sermon explores the themes of trust in God, the power of God, and the importance of praising God, using the example of David and the Ziphites.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 24:4, Psalm 53:1 - 54:1, Isaiah 40:6, Luke 12:20, John 18:36, Romans 8:26, 2 Corinthians 1:12, 2 Corinthians 12:8, Colossians 3:3

Topics: "Praising God", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the significance of Psalm 53, focusing on the hidden meanings within the text. He delves into the allegorical interpretation of the Ziphites as enemies of David, representing those who flourish in worldly pursuits but wither in judgment. Augustine emphasizes the importance of seeking God's help and judgment, rather than being swayed by temporary worldly success. He encourages voluntary sacrifice of praise to God out of genuine love and gratitude, highlighting the joy found in praising God for His own sake. Through tribulations, one can gain a deeper understanding of God's goodness and deliverance from all troubles.

Transcript

1. The title of this Psalm has fruit in the prolixity thereof, if it be understood: and because the Psalm is short, let us make up our not having to tarry over the Psalm by tarrying over the title. For upon this depends every verse which is sung. If any one, therefore, observe that which on the front of the house is fixed, secure he will enter; and, when he shall have entered, he will not err. For this on the post itself is prominently marked, namely, in what manner within he may not be in error. The title thereof stands thus: At the end, in hymns, understanding to David himself, when there came the Ziphites, and said to Saul, Behold, is not David hidden with us? That Saul was persecutor of the holy man David, very well we know: that Saul was bearing the figure of a temporal kingdom, not to life but to death belonging, this also to your Love we remember to have imparted. And also that David himself was bearing the figure of Christ, or of the Body of Christ, you ought both to know and to call to mind, you that have already learned. What then of the Ziphites? There was a certain village, Ziph, whereof the inhabitants were Ziphites, in whose country David had hidden himself, when Saul would find and slay him. These Ziphites then, when they had learned this, betrayed him to the king his persecutor, saying, Behold, is not David hidden with us? Of no good to them indeed was their betrayal, and to David himself of no harm. For their evil disposition was shown: but Saul not even after their betrayal could seize David; but rather in a certain cave in that very country, when into his hands Saul had been given to slay, David spared him, and that which he had in his

power he did not. 1 Samuel 24:4 But the other was seeking to do that which he had not in his power. Let them that have been Ziphites take heed: let us see those whom to us the Psalm presents to be understood by the occasion of those same men.

2. If we inquire then by what word is translated Ziphites, we find, Men flourishing. Flourishing then were certain enemies to holy David, flourishing before him hiding. We may find them in mankind, if we are willing to understand the Psalm. Let us find here at first David hiding, and we shall find his adversaries flourishing. Observe David hiding: For you are dead, says the Apostle to the members of Christ, and your life is hid with Christ in God. Colossians 3:3 These men, therefore, that are hiding, when shall they be flourishing? When Christ, he says, your life, shall have appeared, then ye also with Him shall appear in glory. Colossians 3:4 When these men shall be flourishing, then shall be those Ziphites withering. For observe to what flower their glory is compared: All flesh is grass, and the honour of flesh as the flower of grass. Isaiah 40:6 What is the end? The grass has withered, and the flower has fallen off. Where then shall be David? See what follows: But the Word of the Lord abides for ever....

3. These men sometimes are observed of the weak sons of light, and their feet totter, when they have seen evil men in felicity to flourish, and they say to themselves, Of what profit to me is innocence? What does it advantage me that I serve God, that I keep His commandments, that I oppress no one, from no one plunder anything, hurt no one, that what I can I bestow? Behold, all these things I do, and they flourish, I toil. But why? Would you also wish to be a Ziphite? They flourish in the world, wither in judgment, and after withering, into fire everlasting shall be cast: would you also choose this? Are you ignorant of what He has promised you, who to you has come, what in Himself here He displayed? If the flower of the Ziphites were to be desired, would not Himself your Lord also in this world have flourished? Or indeed was there wanting to Him the power to flourish? Nay but here He chose rather amid the Ziphites to hide, and to say to Pontius Pilate, as if to one being himself also a flower of the Ziphites, and in suspicion about His kingdom, My kingdom is not of this world. John 18:36 Therefore here He was hidden: and all good men are hidden here, because their good is within, it is concealed, in the heart it is, where is faith, where charity, where hope, where their treasure is. Do these good things appear in the world? Both these good things are hidden, and the reward of these good things is hidden....

4. O God, in Your name make me safe, and in Your virtue judge me Psalm 53:1. Let the Church say this, hiding amid the Ziphites. Let the Christian body say this, keeping secret the good of its morals, expecting in secret the reward of its merits, let it say this: In Your virtue judge me. You have come, O Christ, humble You have appeared, despised You have been, scourged hast been, crucified hast been, slain hast been; but, on the third day hast risen, on the fortieth day into Heaven hast ascended: You sit at the right hand of the Father, and no one sees: Your Spirit thence You have sent, which men that were worthy have received; fulfilled with Your love, the praise of that very humility of Yours throughout the world and nations they have preached: Your name I see to excel among mankind, but nevertheless as weak to us have You been preached. For not even did that Teacher of the Gentiles say, that among us he knew anything, Save Christ Jesus, and Him crucified; 1 Corinthians 2:2 in order that of Him we might choose the reproach, rather than the glory of the flourishing Ziphites. Nevertheless, of Him he says what? Although He died of weakness, yet He lives of the power of God. He came then that He might die of weakness, He is to come that He may judge in the power of God: but through the weakness of the Cross His name has been illustrious. Whosoever shall not have believed upon the name made illustrious through weakness, shall stand in awe at the Judge, when He shall have come in power. But, lest He that once was weak, when He shall have come strong, with that fan send us to the left hand; may He save us in His name, and judge us

in His virtue. For who so rash as to have desired this, as to say to God, for instance Judge me? Is it not wont to be said to men for a curse, God judge you? So evidently it is a curse, if He judge you in His virtue; and shall not have saved you in His name: but when in name precedent He shall have saved you, to your health in virtue consequent He shall judge. Be thou without care: that judgment shall not to you be punishment, but dividing. For in a certain Psalm thus is said: Judge me, O God, and divide my cause from the nation unholy....

5. O God, hearken to my prayer, in Your ears receive the words of my mouth Psalm 53:2....To You may my prayer attain, driven forth and darted out from the desire of Your eternal blessings: to Your ears I send it forth, aid it that it may reach, lest it fall short in the middle of the way, and fainting as it were it fall down. But even if there result not to me now the good things which I ask, I am secured nevertheless that hereafter they will come. For even in the case of transgressions a certain man is said to have asked of God, and not to have been hearkened to for his good.

For privations of this world had inspired him to prayer, and being set in temporal tribulations he had wished that temporal tribulations should pass away, and there should return the flower of grass; and he says, My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? The very voice of Christ it is, but for His members' sake. The words, he says, of my transgressions I have cried to You throughout the day, and You have not hearkened: and by night, and not for the sake of folly to me: that is, and by night I have cried, and You have not hearkened; and nevertheless in this very thing that You have not hearkened, it is not for the sake of folly to me that You have not hearkened, but rather for the sake of wisdom that You have not hearkened, that I might perceive what of You I ought to ask.

For those things I was asking which to my cost perchance I should have received. Thou ask riches, O man; how many have been overset through their riches? Whence do you know whether to you riches may profit? Have not many poor men more safely been in obscurity; having become rich men, so soon as they have begun to blaze forth, they have been a prey to the stronger? How much better they would have lain concealed, how much better they would have been unknown, that have begun to be inquired after not for the sake of what they were, but for the sake of what they had!

In these temporal things therefore, brethren, we admonish and exhort you in the Lord, that you ask not anything as if it were a thing settled, but that which God knows to be expedient for you. For what is expedient for you, you know not at all. Sometimes that which you think to be for you is against you, and that which you think to be against you is for you. For sick you are; do not dictate to the physician the medicines he may choose to set beside you. If the teacher of the Gentiles, Paul the Apostle, says, For what we should pray for as we ought, we know not, Romans 8:26 how much more we?

Who nevertheless, when he seemed to himself to pray wisely, namely, that from him should be taken away the thorn of the flesh, the angel of Satan, that did buffet him, in order that he might not in the greatness of the revelations be lifted up, heard from the Lord what? Was that done which he wished? Nay, in order to that being done which was expedient, he heard from the Lord, I say, what? Thrice, he says, I besought the Lord that He would take it from me; and He said to me, My Grace suffices for you: for virtue in weakness is made perfect. 2 Corinthians 12:8-9 Salve to the wound I have applied; when I applied it I know, when it should be taken away I know.

Let not a sick man draw back from the hands of the physician, let him not give advice to the physician. So it is with all these things temporal. There are tribulations; if well you worship God, you will know that He

knows what is expedient for each man: there are prosperities; take the more heed, lest these same corrupt your soul, so that it withdraw from Him that has given these things....

6. For aliens have risen up against me Psalm 53:3. What aliens? Was not David himself a Jew of the tribe of Judah? But the very place Ziph belonged to the tribe of Judah; it was of the Jews. How then aliens? Not in city, not in tribe, not in kindred, but in flower.. ..But see the Ziphites, see them for a time flourishing. With reason alien sons. You amid the Ziphites hiding said what? Blessed the people whereof the Lord is its God. Out of this affection this prayer is being sent forth into the ears of the Lord, when it is said, for aliens have risen up against me.

7. And mighty men have sought after my soul. For in a new manner, my brethren, they would destroy the race of holy men, and the race of them that abstain from hoping in this world, all they that have hope in this world. Certainly commingled they are, certainly together they live. Very much to one another are opposed these two sorts: the one of those that place no hope but in things secular, and in temporal felicity, and the other of those that do firmly place their hope in the Lord God. And though concordant are these Ziphites, do not much trust to their concord: temptations are wanting; when there shall have come any temptation, so as that a person may be reproved for the flower of the world, I say not to you he will quarrel with the Bishop, but not even to the Church Herself will he draw near, lest there fall any part of the grass. Wherefore have I said these words, brethren? Because now gladly ye all hear in the name of Christ, and according as you understand, so ye shout out at the word; ye would not indeed shout at it unless ye understood. This your understanding ought to be fruitful. But whether it is fruitful, temptation does try; lest suddenly when you are said to be ours, through temptation ye be found aliens, and it be said, Aliens have risen up against me, and mighty men have sought my soul. Be not that said which follows, They have not set forth God before their face. For when will he set God before his face, before whose eyes there is nought but the world? namely, how he may have coin upon coin, how flocks may be increased, how barns may be filled, how it may be said to his soul, You have many good things, be merry, feast, take your fill. Does he set before his face Him, that unto one so boasting and so blooming with the flower of the Ziphites says, Fool (that is, man not understanding, man unwise), this night shall be taken from you your soul; all these things which you have prepared, whose shall they be? Luke 12:20

8. For behold, God helps me Psalm 53:4. Even themselves know not themselves, amid whom I am hiding. But if they too were to set God before their face, they would find in what manner God helps me. For all holy men are helped by God, but within, where no one sees. For in like manner as the conscience of ungodly men is a great punishment, so a great joy is the very conscience of godly men. For our glory this is, says the Apostle, the testimony of our conscience. 2 Corinthians 1:12 In this within, not in the flower of the Ziphites without, does glory that man that now says, For behold God helps me. Surely though afar off are to be those things which He promises, this day have I a sweet and present help; today in my heart's joy I find that without cause certain say, Who does show to us good things? For there is signed upon us the light of Your countenance, O Lord, You have put pleasantness into my heart. Not into my vineyard, not into my flock, not into my cask, not into my table, but into my heart. For behold God helps me. How does He help you? And the Lord is the lifter up of my soul.

9. Turn away evil things unto mine enemies Psalm 53:5. So however green they are, so however they flourish, for the fire they are being reserved. In Your virtue destroy Thou them. Because to wit they flourish now, because to wit they spring up like grass: do not thou be a man unwise and foolish, so that by giving thought to these things thou perish for ever and ever. For, Turn Thou away evil things unto mine enemies. For if you shall have place in the body of David Himself, in His virtue He will destroy them. These men

flourish in the felicity of the world, perish in the virtue of God. Not in the same manner as they flourish, do they also perish: for they flourish for a time, perish for everlasting: flourish in unreal good things, perish in real torments. In Your strength destroy, whom in Your weakness You have endured.

10. Voluntarily I will sacrifice to You Psalm 53:6. Who can even understand this good thing of the heart, at another's speaking thereof, unless in himself he has tasted it? What is, Voluntarily I will sacrifice to You?... For what sacrifice here shall I take, brethren? Or what worthily shall I offer to the Lord for His mercy? Victims shall I seek from flock of sheep, ram shall I select, for any bull in the herds shall I look out, frankincense indeed from the land of the Sabaeans shall I bring? What shall I do? What offer; except that whereof He speaks, Sacrifice of praise shall honour Me? Wherefore then voluntarily? Because truly I love that which I praise. I praise God, and in the self-same praise I rejoice: in the praise of Himself I rejoice, at whom being praised, I blush not. For He is not praised in the same manner as by those who love the theatrical follies is praised either by a charioteer, or a hunter, or actor of any kind, and by their praisers, other praisers are invited, are exhorted, to shout together: and when all have shouted, oftentimes, if their favourite is overcome, they are all put to the blush. Not so is our God: be He praised with the will, loved with charity: let it be gratuitous (or voluntary) that He is loved and that He is praised. What is gratuitous? Himself for the sake of Himself, not for the sake of something else. For if you praise God in order that He may give you something else, no longer freely do you love God. You would blush, if your wife for the sake of riches were to love you, and perchance if poverty should befall you, should begin to think of adultery. Seeing that therefore you would be loved by your partner freely, will you for anything else love God? What reward are you to receive of God, O covetous man? Not earth for you, but Himself He keeps, who made heaven and earth. Voluntarily I will sacrifice to You: do it not of necessity. For if for the sake of anything else you praise God, out of necessity you praise. These things also which He has given, because of the Giver are good things. For He gives entirely, He gives these temporal things: and to certain men to their good, to certain men to their harm, after the height and depth of His judgments.... Voluntarily I will sacrifice to You. Wherefore voluntarily? Because gratis. What is gratis? And I will confess to Your name, O Lord, for it is a good thing: for nothing else, but because a good thing it is. Does he say, I will confess to Your name, O Lord, because You give me fruitful manors, because You give me gold and silver, because You give me extended riches, abundant money, most exalted dignity? Nay. But what? For it is a good thing. Nothing I find better than Your name.

11. For out of all tribulation You have delivered me Psalm 53:7. For this cause I have perceived how good a thing is Your name: for if this I were able before tribulations to acknowledge, perchance for me there had been no need of them. But tribulation has been applied for admonition, admonition has redounded to Your praise. For I should not have understood where I was, except of my weakness I had been admonished. Out of all tribulations, therefore, You have delivered me. And upon mine enemies my eye has looked back: upon those Ziphites my eye has looked back. Yea, their flower I have passed over in loftiness of heart, unto You I have come, and thence I have looked back upon them, and have seen that All flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass: Isaiah 40:6 as in a certain place is also said, I have seen the ungodly man to be exalted and raised up like the cedars of Lebanon: I passed by, and, lo! He was not. Wherefore he was not? Because you have passed by. What is, because you have passed by? Because not to no purpose have you heard Lift up your heart; because not on earth, where you would have rotted, you have remained; because you have lifted your soul to God, and you have mounted beyond the cedars of Lebanon, and from that elevation hast observed: and Lo! He was not; and you have sought him, and there has not been found place for him. No longer is labour before you; because you have entered into the sanctuary of God, and hast understood for the last things. So also here thus he concludes. And upon mine

enemies my eye has looked back. This do ye therefore, brethren, with your souls; lift up your hearts, sharpen the edge of your mind, learn truly to love God, learn to despise the present world, learn voluntarily to sacrifice the offerings of praise; to the end that, mounting beyond the flower of the grass, you may look back upon your enemies.

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