

Exposition on Psalm 6

by St. Augustine

The Psalm 6 is a prayer of the Church, asking for pity and healing, and warning the ungodly to depart from her.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 13:3, Isaiah 65:24, Mark 13:32, Acts 1:7, Romans 5:14, Romans 7:25, 1 Corinthians 15:56, Colossians 3:10, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 1 Peter 4:18

Topics: "Repentance And Faith", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on Psalm 6, reflecting on the day of judgment and the importance of turning to God in repentance. He delves into the symbolism of the number eight, representing the eternal life attained after the end of this world. Augustine emphasizes the need to let go of worldly desires and turn towards spiritual renewal, symbolized by the transition from living according to the body to living according to the soul. The psalmist's plea for healing and deliverance highlights the soul's struggle with sin and the longing for God's compassion and mercy. Through tears, prayers, and repentance, the soul seeks transformation and restoration, acknowledging its weaknesses and sins.

Transcript

To the end, in the hymns of the eighth, a psalm to David. 1. Of the eighth, seems here obscure. For the rest of this title is more clear. Now it has seemed to some to intimate the day of judgment, that is, the time of the coming of our Lord, when He will come to judge the quick and dead. Which coming, it is believed, is to be, after reckoning the years from Adam, seven thousand years: so as that seven thousand years should pass as seven days, and afterwards that time arrive as it were the eighth day.

But since it has been said by the Lord, It is not yours to know the times, which the Father has put in His own power: Acts 1:7 and, But of the day and that hour knows no man, no, neither angel, nor Power, neither the Son, but the Father alone: Mark 13:32 and again, that which is written, that the day of the Lord comes as a thief, 1 Thessalonians 5:2 shows clearly enough that no man should arrogate to himself the knowledge of that time, by any computation of years. For if that day is to come after seven thousand years, every man could learn its advent by reckoning the years.

What comes then of the Son's even not knowing this? Which of course is said with this meaning, that men do not learn this by the Son, not that He by Himself does not know it: according to that form of speech, the Lord your God tries you that He may know; Deuteronomy 13:3 that is, that He may make you know: and, arise, O Lord; that is, make us arise. When therefore the Son is thus said not to know this day; not because He knows it not, but because He causes those to know it not, for whom it is not expedient to

know it, that is, He does not show it to them; what does that strange presumption mean, which, by a reckoning up of years, expects the day of the Lord as most certain after seven thousand years? 2.

Be we then willingly ignorant of that which the Lord would not have us know: and let us inquire what this title, of the eighth, means. The day of judgment may indeed, even without any rash computation of years, be understood by the eighth, for that immediately after the end of this world, life eternal being attained, the souls of the righteous will not then be subject unto times: and, since all times have their revolution in a repetition of those seven days, that perhaps is called the eighth day, which will not have this variety.

There is another reason, which may be here not unreasonably accepted, why the judgment should be called the eighth, because it will take place after two generations, one relating to the body, the other to the soul. For from Adam unto Moses the human race lived of the body, that is, according to the flesh: which is called the outward and the old man, and to which the Old Testament was given, that it might prefigure the spiritual things to come by operations, albeit religious, yet carnal.

Through this entire season, when men lived according to the body, death reigned, as the Apostle says, even over those that had not sinned. Now it reigned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, Romans 5:14 as the same Apostle says; for it must be taken of the period up to Moses, up to which time the works of the law, that is, those sacraments of carnal observance, held even those bound, for the sake of a certain mystery, who were subject to the One God. But from the coming of the Lord, from whom there was a transition from the circumcision of the flesh to the circumcision of the heart, the call was made, that man should live according to the soul, that is, according to the inner man, who is also called the new man Colossians 3:10 by reason of the new birth and the renewing of spiritual conversation.

Now it is plain that the number four has relation to the body, from the four well known elements of which it consists, and the four qualities of dry, humid, warm, cold. Hence too it is administered by four seasons, spring, summer, autumn, winter. All this is very well known. For of the number four relating to the body we have treated elsewhere somewhat subtly, but obscurely: which must be avoided in this discourse, which we would have accommodated to the unlearned. But that the number three has relation to the mind may be understood from this, that we are commanded to love God after a threefold manner, with the whole heart, with the whole soul, with the whole mind: of each of which severally we must treat, not in the Psalms, but in the Gospels: for the present, for proof of the relation of the number three to the mind, I think what has been said enough.

Those numbers then of the body which have relation to the old man and the Old Testament, being past and gone, the numbers too of the soul, which have relation to the new man and the New Testament, being past and gone, a septenary so to say being passed; because everything is done in time, four having been distributed to the body, three to the mind; the eighth will come, the day of judgment: which assigning to deserts their due, will transfer at once the saint, not to temporal works, but to eternal life; but will condemn the ungodly to eternal punishment.

3. In fear of which condemnation the Church prays in this Psalm, and says, Reprove me not, O Lord, in Your anger Psalm 6:1. The Apostle too mentions the anger of the judgment; You treasure up unto yourself, he says, anger against the day of the anger of the just judgment of God. Romans 2:5 In which he would not be reprov'd, whosoever longs to be healed in this life. Nor in Your rage chasten me. Chasten, seems rather too mild a word; for it avails toward amendment. For for him who is reprov'd, that is, accused, it is to be feared lest his end be condemnation. But since rage seems to be more than anger, it

may be a difficulty, why that which is milder, namely, chastening, is joined to that which is more severe, namely, rage. But I suppose that one and the same thing is signified by the two words. For in the Greek ἡ...ἡ...ἡ, which is in the first verse, means the same as ἡ...ἡ, which is in the second verse. But when the Latins themselves too wished to use two distinct words, they looked out for what was akin to anger, and rage was used. Hence copies vary. For in some anger is found first, and then rage: in others, for rage, indignation or choler is used. But whatever the reading, it is an emotion of the soul urging to the infliction of punishment. Yet this emotion must not be attributed to God, as if to a soul, of whom it is said, but Thou, O Lord of power, judgest with tranquillity. Wisdom 12:18 Now that which is tranquil, is not disturbed. Disturbance then does not attach to God as judge: but what is done by His ministers, in that it is done by His laws, is called His anger. In which anger, the soul, which now prays, would not only not be reproved, but not even chastened, that is, amended or instructed. For in the Greek it is, ἐκ...ἐκ...ἡ, that is, instruct. Now in the day of judgment all are reproved that hold not the foundation, which is Christ. But they are amended, that is, purged, who upon this foundation build wood, hay, stubble. For they shall suffer loss, but shall be saved, as by fire. What then does he pray, who would not be either reproved or amended in the anger of the Lord? What else but that he may be healed? For where sound health is, neither death is to be dreaded, nor the physician's hand with caustics or the knife.

4. He proceeds accordingly to say, Pity me, O Lord, for I am weak: heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled Psalm 6:2, that is, the support of my soul, or strength: for this is the meaning of bones. The soul therefore says, that her strength is troubled, when she speaks of bones. For it is not to be supposed, that the soul has bones, such as we see in the body. Wherefore, what follows tends to explain it, and my soul is troubled exceedingly Psalm 6:3, lest because he mentioned bones, they should be understood as of the body. And You, O Lord, how long? Who does not see represented here a soul struggling with her diseases; but long kept back by the physician, that she may be convinced what evils she has plunged herself into through sin? For what is easily healed, is not much avoided: but from the difficulty of the healing, there will be the more careful keeping of recovered health. God then, to whom it is said, And You, O Lord, how long? must not be deemed as if cruel: but as a kind convincer of the soul, what evil she has procured for herself. For this soul does not yet pray so perfectly, as that it can be said to her, Whilst you are yet speaking I will say, Behold, here I am. Isaiah 65:24 That she may at the same time also come to know, if they who do turn meet with so great difficulty, how great punishment is prepared for the ungodly, who will not turn to God: as it is written in another place, If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the sinner and ungodly appear? 1 Peter 4:18

5. Turn, O Lord, and deliver my soul Psalm 6:4. Turning herself she prays that God too would turn to her: as it is said, Turn ye unto Me, and I will turn unto you, says the Lord. Zechariah 1:3 Or is it to be understood according to that way of speaking, Turn, O Lord, that is make me turn, since the soul in this her turning feels difficulty and toil? For our perfected turning finds God ready, as says the Prophet, We shall find Him ready as the dawn. Since it was not His absence who is everywhere present, but our turning away that made us lose Him; He was in this world, it is said, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. John 1:10 If, then, He was in this world, and the world knew Him not, our impurity does not endure the sight of Him. But while we are turning ourselves, that is, by changing our old life are fashioning our spirit; we feel it hard and toilsome to be wrested back from the darkness of earthly lusts, to the serene and quiet and tranquillity of the divine light. And in such difficulty we say, Turn, O Lord, that is, help us, that that turning may be perfected in us, which finds You ready, and offering Yourself for the fruition of them that love You. And hence after he said, Turn, O Lord, he added, and deliver my soul: cleaving as it were to the entanglements of this world, and suffering, in the very act of turning, from the

thorns, as it were, of rending and tearing desires. Make me whole, he says, for Your pity's sake. He knows that it is not of his own merits that he is healed: for to him sinning, and transgressing a given command, was just condemnation due. Heal me therefore, he says, not for my merit's sake, but for Your pity's sake.

6. For in death there is no one that is mindful of You Psalm 6:5. He knows too that now is the time for turning unto God: for when this life shall have passed away, there remains but a retribution of our deserts. But in hell who shall confess to You? Luke xvi That rich man, of whom the Lord speaks, who saw Lazarus in rest, but bewailed himself in torments, confessed in hell, yea so as to wish even to have his brethren warned, that they might keep themselves from sin, because of the punishment which is not believed to be in hell. Although therefore to no purpose, yet he confessed that those torments had deservedly lighted upon him; since he even wished his brethren to be instructed, lest they should fall into the same. What then is, But in hell who will confess to You? Is hell to be understood as that place, whither the ungodly will be cast down after the judgment, when by reason of that deeper darkness they will no more see any light of God, to whom they may confess anything? For as yet that rich man by raising his eyes, although a vast gulf lay between, could still see Lazarus established in rest: by comparing himself with whom, he was driven to a confession of his own deserts. It may be understood also, as if the Psalmist calls sin, that is committed in contempt of God's law, death: so as that we should give the name of death to the sting of death, because it procures death. For the sting of death is sin. 1 Corinthians 15:56 In which death this is to be unmindful of God, to despise His law and commandments: so that by hell the Psalmist would mean that blindness of soul which overtakes and enwraps the sinner, that is, the dying. As they did not think good, the Apostle says, to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind. Romans 1:28 From this death, and this hell, the soul earnestly prays that she may be kept safe, while she strives to turn to God, and feels her difficulties.

7. Wherefore he goes on to say, I have laboured in my groaning. And as if this availed but little, he adds, I will wash each night my couch Psalm 6:6. That is here called a couch, where the sick and weak soul rests, that is, in bodily gratification and in every worldly pleasure. Which pleasure, whoso endeavours to withdraw himself from it, washes with tears. For he sees that he already condemns carnal lusts; and yet his weakness is held by the pleasure, and willingly lies down therein, from whence none but the soul that is made whole can rise. As for what he says, each night, he would perhaps have it taken thus: that he who, ready in spirit, perceives some light of truth, and yet, through weakness of the flesh, rests sometime in the pleasure of this world, is compelled to suffer as it were days and nights in an alternation of feeling: as when he says, With the mind I serve the law of God, he feels as it were day; again when he says, but with the flesh the law of sin, Romans 7:25 he declines into night: until all night passes away, and that one day comes, of which it is said, In the morning I will stand by You, and will see. For then he will stand, but now he lies down, when he is on his couch; which he will wash each night, that with so great abundance of tears he may obtain the most assured remedy from the mercy of God. I will drench my bed with tears. It is a repetition. For when he says, with tears, he shows with what meaning he said above, I will wash. For we take bed here to be the same as couch above. Although, I will drench, is something more than, I will wash: since anything may be washed superficially, but drenching penetrates to the more inward parts; which here signifies weeping to the very bottom of the heart. Now the variety of tenses which he uses; the past, when he said, I have laboured in my groaning; and the future, when he said, I will wash each night my couch; the future again, I will drench my bed with tears; this shows what every man ought to say to himself, when he labours in groaning to no purpose. As if he should say, It has not profited when I have done this, therefore I will do the other.

8. My eye is disordered by anger Psalm 6:7: is it by his own, or God's anger, in which he makes petition that he might not be reprov'd, or chasten'd? But if anger in that place intimate the day of judgment, how can it be understood now? Is it a beginning of it, that men here suffer pains and torments, and above all the loss of the understanding of the truth; as I have already quoted that which is said, God gave them over to a reprobate mind? Romans 1:28 For such is the blindness of the mind. Whosoever is given over thereunto, is shut out from the interior light of God: but not wholly as yet, while he is in this life. For there is outer darkness, Matthew 25:30 which is understood to belong rather to the day of judgment; that he should rather be wholly without God, whosoever while there is time refuses correction. Now to be wholly without God, what else is it, but to be in extreme blindness? If indeed God dwell in inaccessible light, 1 Timothy 6:16 whereinto they enter, to whom it is said, Enter into the joy of your Lord. It is then the beginning of this anger, which in this life every sinner suffers. In fear therefore of the day of judgment, he is in trial and grief; lest he be brought to that, the disastrous commencement of which he experiences now. And therefore he did not say, my eye is extinguished, but, my eye is disordered by anger. But if he mean that his eye is disordered by his own anger, there is no wonder either in this. For hence perhaps it is said, Let not the sun go down upon your wrath; Ephesians 4:26 because the mind, which, from her own disorder, is not permitted to see God, supposes that the inner sun, that is, the wisdom of God, suffers as it were a setting in her.

9. I have grown old in all mine enemies. He had only spoken of anger (if it were yet of his own anger that he spoke): but thinking on his other vices, he found that he was entrenched by them all. Which vices, as they belong to the old life and the old man, which we must put off, that we may put on the new man, Colossians 3:9-10 it is well said, I have grown old. But in all mine enemies, he means, either amidst these vices, or amidst men who will not be converted to God. For these, even if they know them not, even if they bear with them, even if they use the same tables and houses and cities, with no strife arising between them, and in frequent converse together with seeming concord: notwithstanding, by the contrariety of their aims, they are enemies to those who turn unto God. For seeing that the one love and desire this world, the others wish to be freed from this world, who sees not that the first are enemies to the last? For if they can, they draw the others into punishment with them. And it is a great grace, to be conversant daily with their words, and not to depart from the way of God's commandments. For often the mind which is striving to go on to God-ward, being rudely handled in the very road, is alarmed; and generally fulfils not its good intent, lest it should offend those with whom it lives, who love and follow after other perishable and transient goods. From such every one that is whole is separated, not in space, but in soul. For the body is contained in space, but the soul's space is her affection.

10. Wherefore after the labour, and groaning, and very frequent showers of tears, since that cannot be ineffectual, which is asked so earnestly of Him, who is the Fountain of all mercies, and it is most truly said, the Lord is near unto them that are of a broken heart: after difficulties so great, the pious soul, by which we may also understand the Church, intimating that she has been heard, see what she adds: Depart from me, all you that work iniquity; for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping Psalm 6:8. It is either spoken prophetically, since they will depart, that is, the ungodly will be separated from the righteous, when the day of judgment arrives, or, for this time present. For although both are equally found in the same assemblies, yet on the open floor the wheat is already separated from the chaff, though it be hid among the chaff. They can therefore be associated together, but cannot be carried away by the wind together.

11. For the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping; The Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord has received my prayer Psalm 6:9. The frequent repetition of the same sentiments shows not, so to say, the

necessities of the narrator, but the warm feeling of his joy. For they that rejoice are wont so to speak, as that it is not enough for them to declare once for all the object of their joy. This is the fruit of that groaning in which there is labour, and those tears with which the couch is washed, and bed drenched: for, he that sows in tears, shall reap in joy: and, blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.

12. Let all mine enemies be ashamed and vexed Psalm 6:10. He said above, depart from me all you: which can take place, as it has been explained, even in this life: but as to what he says, let them be ashamed and vexed, I do not see how it can happen, save on that day when the rewards of the righteous and the punishments of the sinners shall be made manifest. For at present so far are the ungodly from being ashamed, that they do not cease to insult us. And for the most part their mockings are of such avail, that they make the weak to be ashamed of the name of Christ. Hence it is said, Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me before men, of him will I be ashamed before My Father. But now whosoever would fulfil those sublime commands, to disperse, to give to the poor, that his righteousness may endure for ever; and selling all his earthly goods, and spending them on the needy, would follow Christ, saying, We brought nothing into this world, and truly we can carry nothing out; having food and raiment, let us be therewith content; 1 Timothy 6:7-8 incurs the profane raillery of those men, and by those who will not be made whole, is called mad; and often to avoid being so called by desperate men, he fears to do, and puts off that, which the most faithful and powerful of all physicians has ordered. It is not then at present that these can be ashamed, by whom we have to wish that we be not made ashamed, and so be either called back from our proposed journey, or hindered, or delayed. But the time will come when they shall be ashamed, saying as it is written, These are they whom we had sometimes in derision, and a parable of reproach: we fools counted their life madness, and their end to be without honour: how are they numbered among the children of God, and their lot is among the saints? Therefore have we erred from the way of truth, and the light of righteousness has not shined into us, nor the sun risen upon us: we have been filled with the way of wickedness and destruction, and have walked through rugged deserts, but the way of the Lord we have not known. What has pride profited us, or what has the vaunting of riches brought us? All those things are passed away like a shadow. Wisdom 5:3-9

13. But as to what he says, Let them be turned and confounded, who would not judge it to be a most righteous punishment, that they should have a turning unto confusion, who would not have one unto salvation? After this he added, exceeding quickly. For when the day of judgment shall have begun to be no longer looked for, when they shall have said, Peace, then shall sudden destruction come upon them. 1 Thessalonians 5:3 Now whenever it come, that comes very quickly, of whose coming we give up all expectation; and nothing makes the length of this life be felt but the hope of living. For nothing seems more quick, than all that has already passed in it. When then the day of judgment shall come, then will sinners feel how that all the life which passes away is not long. Nor will that any way possibly seem to them to have come tardily, which shall have come without their desiring, or rather without their believing. Although it can too be taken in this place thus, that inasmuch as God has heard, so to say, her groans, and her long and frequent tears, she may be understood to be freed from her sins, and to have tamed every disordered impulse of carnal affection: as she says, Depart from me, all you that work iniquity, for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping: and when she has had this happy issue, it is no marvel if she be already so perfect as to pray for her enemies. The words then, Let all mine enemies be ashamed, and vexed, may have this meaning; that they should repent of their sins, which cannot be effected without confusion and vexation. There is then nothing to hinder us from taking what follows too in this sense, let them be turned and ashamed, that is, let them be turned to God, and be ashamed that they sometime gloried in the former darkness of their sins; as the Apostle says, For what glory had ye sometime in those

things of which you are now ashamed? Romans 6:21 But as to what he added, exceeding quickly, it must be referred either to the warm affection of her wish, or to the power of Christ; who converts to the faith of the Gospel in such quick time the nations, which in their idols' cause did persecute the Church.

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