

Exposition on Psalm 79

by St. Augustine

The sermon explains how the Gentiles have come into God's inheritance, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the persecution of the Church, but ultimately calls for God's mercy and forgiveness.

Topics: "Gods Mercy", "Church Unity"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on Psalm 78, highlighting the fulfillment of prophecies seen in the past. He delves into the imagery of the Gentiles coming into God's inheritance, symbolizing future events. The psalmist laments the defilement of the Temple and the desolation of Jerusalem, reflecting on the remnant saved through God's grace. The sermon emphasizes the Church as God's inheritance, uniting believers from all nations through Christ. St. Augustine explores the concept of God's anger and mercy, urging for His compassion and healing. The psalmist prophesies future vengeance on the ungodly, not as a wish but as a foretelling of justice.

Transcript

1. Over the title of this Psalm, being so short and so simple, I think we need not tarry. But the prophecy which here we read sent before, we know to be evidently fulfilled. For when these things were being sung in the times of King David, nothing of such sort, by the hostility of the Gentiles, as yet had befallen the city Jerusalem, nor the Temple of God, which as yet was not even built. For that after the death of David his son Salomon made a temple to God, who is ignorant? That is spoken of therefore as though past, which in the Spirit was seen to be future.

O God, the Gentiles have come into Your inheritance Psalm 78:1. Under which form of expression other things which were to come to pass, are spoken of as having been done. Nor must this be wondered at, that these words are being spoken to God. For they are not being represented to Him not knowing, by whose revelation they are foreknown; but the soul is speaking with God with that affection of godliness, of which God knows. For even the things which Angels proclaim to men, they proclaim to them that know them not; but the things which they proclaim to God, they proclaim to Him knowing, when they offer our prayers, and in ineffable manner consult the eternal Truth respecting their actions, as an immutable law. And therefore this man of God is saying to God that which he is to learn of God, like a scholar to a master, not ignorant but judging; and so either approving what he has taught, or censuring what he has not taught: especially because under the appearance of one praying, the Prophet is transforming into himself those who should be at the time when these things were to come to pass. But in praying it is customary to

declare those things to God which He has done in taking vengeance, and for a petition to be added, that henceforth He should pity and spare. In this way here also by him the judgments are spoken of by whom they are foretold, as if they were being spoken of by those whom they befell, and the very lamentation and prayer is a prophecy.

2. They have defiled Your holy Temple, they have made Jerusalem for a keeping of apples. They have made the dead bodies of Your servants morsels for the fowls of heaven, the fleshes of Your saints for the beasts of the earth Psalm 78:2. They have poured forth their blood like water in the circuit of Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them Psalm 78:3. If in this prophecy any one of us shall have thought that there must be understood that laying waste of Jerusalem, which was made by Titus the Roman Emperor, when already the Lord Jesus Christ, after His Resurrection and Ascension, was being preached among the Gentiles, it does not occur to me how that people could now have been called the inheritance of God, as not holding to Christ, whom having rejected and slain, that people became reprobate, which not even after His Resurrection would believe in Him, and even killed His Martyrs.

For out of that people Israel whosoever have believed in Christ; to whom the offer of Christ was made, and in a manner the healthful and fruitful fulfilment of the promise; concerning whom even the Lord Himself says, I am not sent but to the sheep which have been lost of the house of Israel, Matthew 15:24 the same are they that out of them are the sons of promise; the same are counted for a seed; Romans 9:8 the same do belong to the inheritance of God. From hence are Joseph that just man, and the Virgin Mary who bore Christ: Matthew 1:16 hence John Baptist the friend of the Bridegroom, and his parents Zacharias and Elisabeth: Luke 1:5 hence Symeon the old, Luke 2:25 and Anna the widow, who heard not Christ speaking by the sense of the body; but while yet an infant not speaking, by the Spirit perceived Him: hence the blessed Apostles: hence Nathanael, in whom guile was not: John 1:47 hence the other Joseph, who himself too looked for the kingdom of God: hence that so great multitude who went before and followed after His beast, saying, Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord: Matthew 21:9 among whom was also that company of children, in whom He declared to have been fulfilled, Out of the mouth of infants and sucklings You have perfected praise.

Hence also were those after His resurrection, of whom on one day three and on another five thousand were baptized, welded into one soul and one heart by the fire of love; of whom no one spoke of anything as his own, but to them all things were common. Acts 4:32 Hence the holy deacons, of whom Stephen was crowned with martyrdom before the Apostles. Acts 7:59 Hence so many Churches of Judaea, which were in Christ, unto whom Paul was unknown by face, Galatians 1:22 but known for an infamous ferocity, and more known for Christ's most merciful grace.

Hence even he, according to the prophecy sent before concerning him, a wolf ravening, in the morning carrying off, and in the evening dividing morsels; Genesis 49:27 that is, first as persecutor carrying off unto death, afterwards as a preacher feeding unto life. These are they that are out of that people the inheritance of God....So then even at this time a remnant through election of Grace have been saved. This remnant out of that nation does belong to the inheritance of God: not those concerning whom a little below he says, But the rest have been blinded.

For thus he says. What then? That which Israel sought, this he has not obtained: but the election has obtained it: but the rest have been blinded. Romans 11:7 This election then, this remnant, that people of God, which God has not cast off, is called His inheritance. But in that Israel, which has not obtained this, in the rest that were blinded, there was no longer an inheritance of God, in reference to whom it is possible

that there should be spoken, after the glorification of Christ in the Heavens, in the time of Titus the Emperor, O God, there have come the Gentiles unto Your inheritance, and the other things which in this Psalm seem to have been foretold concerning the destruction of both the temple and city belonging to that people.

3. Furthermore herein we ought either to perceive those things which were done by other enemies, before Christ had come in the flesh: at that time when there were even the holy prophets, when the carrying away into Babylon took place, 2 Kings 24:14 and that nation was grievously afflicted, and at the time when under Antiochus also the Maccabees, having endured horrible sufferings, were most gloriously crowned. 2 Maccabees vii Or certainly if after the Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord the inheritance of God must be understood to be here spoken of; such things must be understood herein, as at the hands of worshippers of idols, and enemies of the name of Christ, His Church, in such a multitude of martyrs, endured....This Church then, this inheritance of God, out of circumcision and uncircumcision has been congregated, that is, out of the people of Israel, and out of the rest of the nations, by means of the Stone which the builders rejected, and which has become for the Head of the corner, in which corner as it were two walls coming from different quarters were united. For Himself is our peace, who has made both one, that He might build two into Himself, making peace, and might unite together both in one Body unto God: in which Body we are sons of God, crying, Abba Father. Romans 8:15 Abba, on account of their language; Father, on account of ours. For Abba is the same as Father....

4. But now in that which follows, they have made Jerusalem for a keeping of apples; even the Church herself is rightly understood under this name, even the free Jerusalem our mother, Galatians 4:26 concerning whom has been written, many more are the sons of the forsaken, than of her that has the husband. Isaiah 54:1 The expression, for a keeping of apples, I think must be understood of the desertion which the wasting of persecution has effected: that is, like a keeping of apples; for the keeping of apples is abandoned, when the apples have passed away. And certes when through the persecuting Gentiles the Church seemed to be forsaken, unto the celestial table, like as it were many and exceeding sweet apples from the garden of the Lord, the spirits of the martyrs did pass away.

5. They have made, he says, the dead bodies of Your servants morsels for the fowls of heaven, the fleshes of Your saints for the beasts of the earth Psalm 78:2. The expression, dead bodies, has been repeated in fleshes: and the expression, of Your servants, has been repeated in, of Your saints. This only has been varied, to the fowls of heaven, and to the beasts of the earth. Better have they interpreted who have written dead, than as some have it, mortal. For dead is only said of those that have died; but mortal is a term applied even to living bodies. When then, as I have said, to their Husbandman the spirits of martyrs like apples had passed away, their dead bodies and their fleshes they set before the fowls of heaven and the beasts of the earth: as if any part of them could be lost to the resurrection, whereas out of the hidden recesses of the natural world He will renew the whole, by whom even our hairs have been numbered. Matthew 10:30

6. They have poured forth their blood like water, that is, abundantly and wantonly, in the circuit of Jerusalem Psalm 78:3. If we herein understand the earthly city Jerusalem, we perceive the shedding of their blood in the circuit thereof, whom the enemy could find outside the walls. But if we understand it of that Jerusalem, concerning whom has been said, many more are the sons of her that was forsaken, than of her that has the husband, Isaiah 54:1 the circuit thereof is throughout the universal earth. For in that lesson of the Prophet, wherein is written, many more are the sons of her that was forsaken, than of her that has the husband: a little after unto the same is said, and He that has delivered you, shall be called the

God of Israel of the universal earth. Isaiah 54:5 The circuit then of this Jerusalem in this Psalm must be understood as follows: so far as at that time the Church had been expanded, bearing fruit, and growing in the universal world, when in every part thereof persecution was raging, and was making havoc of the Martyrs, whose blood was being shed like water, to the great gain of the celestial treasures. But as to that which has been added, and there was no one to bury: it either ought not to seem to be an incredible thing that there should have been so great a panic in some places, that not any buriers at all of holy bodies came forward: or certes that unburied corpses in many places might lie long time, until being by the religious in a manner stolen they were buried.

7. We have become, he says, a reproach to our neighbours Psalm 78:4. Therefore precious not in the sight of men, from whom this reproach was, but precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. A scoffing and derision: or, as some have interpreted it, a mockery to them that are in our circuit. It is a repetition of the former sentence. For that which above has been called, a reproach, the same has been repeated in, a scoffing and derision: and that which above has been said in, to our neighbours, the same has been repeated in, to them that are in our circuit. Moreover, in reference to the earthly Jerusalem, the neighbours, and those in the circuit of that nation, are certainly understood to be other nations. But in reference to the free Jerusalem our mother, Galatians 4:26 there are neighbours even in the circuit of her, among whom, being her enemies, the Church dwells in the circuit of the round world.

8. In the second place now giving utterance to an evident prayer, whence it may be perceived that the calling to remembrance of former affliction is not by way of information but prayer; How long, he says, O Lord, will You be angry, unto the end? Shall Your jealousy burn like fire? Psalm 78:5. He is evidently asking God not to be angry unto the end, that is, that this so great oppression and tribulation and devastation may not continue even unto the end; but that He moderate His chastening, according to that which is said in another Psalm, You shall feed us with the bread of tears, and You shall give us to drink of tears in measure. For the, how long, O Lord, will You be angry, unto the end? has been spoken in the same sense as if it had been said, Be not, O Lord, angry unto the end. And in that which follows, shall Your jealousy burn like fire? both words must be understood, both, how long, and, unto the end: just as if there had been said, how long shall there burn like fire Your jealousy unto the end? For these two words must be understood in the same manner as that word which was used a little higher up, namely, they have made. For while the former sentence has, they have made the dead bodies of Your servants morsels for the fowls of heaven: this word the latter sentence has not, wherein is said, the flesh of Your saints for the beasts of the earth; but there is surely understood what the former has, namely, they have made.

Moreover, the anger and jealousy of God are not emotions of God; as some do charge upon the Scriptures which they do not understand: but under the name of anger is to be understood the avenging of iniquity; under the name of jealousy, the exaction of chastity; that the soul may not despise the law of her Lord, and perish by departing in fornication from the Lord. These then in their actual operation in men's affliction are violent; but in the disposal of God they are calm, unto whom has been said, But You, O Lord of virtues, with calmness dost judge. Wisdom 12:18 But it is clearly enough shown by these words, that for sins these tribulations do befall men, though they be faithful: although hence may bloom the Martyrs' glory by occasion of their patience, and the yoke of discipline godly endured as the scourge of the Lord. Of this the Maccabees amid sharp tortures, of this the three men amid flames innocuous, Daniel 3:21 of this the holy Prophets in captivity, do testify. For although paternal correction most bravely and most godly they endure, yet they do not hide the fact, that these things have befallen them for the deservings of their sins..

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9. But that which he adds, Pour forth Your anger upon the nations which have not known You, and upon the kingdoms which have not called upon Your name Psalm 78:6; this too is a prophecy, not a wish. Not in the imprecation of malevolence are these words spoken, but foreseen by the Spirit they are predicted: just as in the case of Judas the traitor, the evil things which were to befall him have been so prophesied as if they were wished. For in like manner as the prophet does not command Christ, though in the imperative mood he gives utterance to what he says, Gird Your sword about Your thigh, O Most Mighty: in Your beauty and in Your goodliness, both go on, and prosperously proceed, and reign: so he does not wish, but does prophesy, who says, Pour forth Your anger upon the nations which have not known You. Which in his usual way he repeats, saying, And upon the kingdoms which have not called upon Your name. For nations have been repeated in kingdoms: and that they have not known Him, has been repeated in this, that they have not called upon His name. How then must be understood, what the Lord says in the Gospel Luke 12:47-48 concerning stripes, the many and the few? If greater the anger of God is against the nations, which have not known the Lord? For in this which he says, Pour forth Your anger, with this word he has clearly enough pointed out, how great anger he has willed that there should be understood. Whence afterwards he says, Render to our neighbours seven times as much. Is it not that there is a great difference between servants, who, though they know not the will of their Lord, do yet call upon His name, and those that are aliens from the family of so great a Master, who are so ignorant of God, as that they do not even call upon God? For in place of Him they call upon either idols or demons, or any creature they choose; not the Creator, who is blessed for ever. For those persons, concerning whom he is prophesying this, he does not even intimate to be so ignorant of the will of their God, as that still they fear the Lord Himself; but so ignorant of the Lord Himself, that they do not even call upon Him, and that they stand forth as enemies of His name. There is a great difference then between servants not knowing the will of their God, and yet living in His family and in His house, and enemies not only setting the will against knowing the Lord Himself, but also not calling upon His name, and even in His servants fighting against it.

10. Lastly, there follows, For they have eaten up Jacob, and his place they have made desolate Psalm 78:7....How we should view the place of Jacob, must be understood. For rather the place of Jacob may be supposed to be that city, wherein was also the Temple, whither-unto the whole of that nation for the purpose of sacrifice and worship, and to celebrate the Passover, the Lord had commanded to assemble. For if the assemblies of Christians, letted and suppressed by persecutors, has been what the Prophet would have to be understood, it would seem that he should have said, places made desolate, not place. Still we may take the singular number as put for the plural number; as dress for clothes, soldiery for soldiers, cattle for beasts: for many words are usually spoken in this manner, and not only in the mouths of vulgar speakers, but even in the eloquence of the most approved authorities. Nor to divine Scripture herself is this form of speech foreign. For even she has put frog for frogs, locust for locusts, and countless expressions of the like kind. But that which has been said, They have eaten up Jacob, the same is well understood, in that many men into their own evil-minded body, that is, into their own society, they have constrained to pass.

11. ...He subjoins, Remember not our iniquities of old Psalm 78:8. He says not bygone, which might have even been recent; but of old, that is, coming from parents. For to such iniquities judgment, not correction, is owing. Speedily let Your mercies anticipate us. Anticipate, that is, at Your judgment. For mercy exalts above in judgment. James 2:13 Now there is judgment without mercy, but to him that has not showed mercy. But whereas he adds, for we have become exceeding poor: unto this end he wills that the mercies of God should be understood to anticipate us; that our own poverty, that is, weakness, by Him having mercy, should be aided to do His commandments, that we may not come to His judgment to be

condemned.

12. Therefore there follows, Help us, O God, our healing One Psalm 78:9. By this word which he says, our healing One, he does sufficiently explain what sort of poverty he has willed to be understood, in that which he had said, for we have become exceeding poor. For it is that very sickness, to which a healer is necessary. But while he would have us to be aided, he is neither ungrateful to grace, nor does he take away free-will. For he that is aided, does also of himself something. He has added also, for the glory of Your Name, O Lord, deliver us: in order that he who glories, not in himself, but in the Lord may glory. 1 Corinthians 1:31 And be merciful, he says, to our sins for Your Name's sake: not for our sake. For what else do our sins deserve, but due and condign punishments?

But be merciful to our sins, for Your Name's sake. Thus then You deliver us, that is, rescue us from evil things, while You both aid us to do justice, and art merciful to our sins, without which in this life we are not. For in Your sight shall no man living be justified. But sin is iniquity. And if You shall have marked iniquities, who shall stand?

13. But that which he adds, lest at any time they should say among the Gentiles, Where is their God? Psalm 78:10 must be taken as rather for the Gentiles themselves. For to a bad end they come that have despaired of the true God, thinking that either He is not, or does not help His own, and is not merciful to them.

But this which follows, and that there may be known among the nations before our eyes the vengeance of the blood of Your servants which has been shed: is either to be understood as of the time, when they believe in the true God that used to persecute His inheritance; because even that is vengeance, whereby is slain the fierce iniquity of them by the sword of the Word of God, concerning which has been said, Gird Your sword: or when obstinate enemies at the last are punished. For the corporal ills which they suffer in this world, they may have in common with good men.

There is also another kind of vengeance; that wherein the Church's enlargement and fruitfulness in this world after so great persecutions, wherein they supposed she would utterly perish, the sinner and unbeliever and enemy sees, and is angry; with his teeth he shall gnash, and shall pine away. For who would dare to deny that even this is a most heavy punishment? But I know not whether that which he says, before our eyes, is taken with sufficient elegance, if by this sort of punishment we understand that which is done in the inmost recesses of the heart, and does torment even those who blandly smile at us, while by us there cannot be seen what they suffer in the inner man.

But the fact, that whether in them believing their iniquity is slain, or whether the last punishment is rendered to them persevering in their naughtiness, without difficulty of doubtfulness is understood in the saying, that there may be known before our eyes vengeance among the nations.

14. And this indeed, as we have said, is a prophecy, not a wish....And the Lord in the Gospel Luke 18:3 has set before us the widow for an example, who longing to be avenged, did intercede with the unjust judge, who at length heard her, not as being guided by justice, but overcome with weariness: but this the Lord has set before us, to show that much more the just God will speedily make the judgment of His elect, who cry unto Him day and night. Thence is also that cry of the Martyrs under the altar of God, Revelation 6:9 that they may be avenged in the judgment of God. Where then is the, Love your enemies, do good unto them that hate you, and pray for them that persecute you? Matthew 5:44 Where is also the, Not rendering evil for evil, nor cursing for cursing: 1 Peter 3:9 and, unto no man rendering evil for evil?

Romans 12:17 ...For when the Lord was exhorting us to love enemies, He set before us the example of our Father, who is in Heaven, who makes His sun to rise upon good men and evil men, and rains upon just men and unjust men: Matthew 5:45 does He yet therefore not chasten even by temporal correction, or not condemn at the last the obstinately hardened? Let therefore an enemy be so loved as that the Lord's justice whereby he is punished displease us not, and let the justice whereby he is punished so please us, as that the joy is not at his evil but at the good Judge. But a malevolent soul is sorrowful, if his enemy by being corrected shall have escaped punishment: and when he sees him punished, he is so glad that he is avenged, that he is not delighted with the justice of God, whom he loves not, but with the misery of that man whom he hates: and when he leaves judgment to God, he hopes that God will hurt more than he could hurt: and when he gives food to his hungering enemy, and drink to him thirsty, he has an evil-minded sense of that which is written, For thus doing you shall heap coals of fire upon his head. Romans 12:20 ...In such sort then under the appearance of one asking in this Psalm, future vengeance on the ungodly is prophesied of, as that we are to understand that holy men of God have loved their enemies, and have wished no one anything but good, which is godliness in this world, everlasting life in that to come; but in the punishments of evil men, they have taken pleasure not in the ills of them, but in God's good judgments; and wheresoever in the holy Scriptures we read of their hatreds against men, they were the hatreds of vices, which every man must needs hate in himself, if he loves himself.

15. But now in that which follows, Let there come in before Your sight, or, as some copies have it, In Your sight, the groans of the fettered: not easily does any one discover that the Saints were thrown into fetters by persecutors; and if this does happen amid so great and manifold a variety of punishments, so rarely it does happen, that it must not be believed that the prophet had chosen to allude to this especially in this verse. But, in fact, the fetters are the infirmity and the corruptibleness of the body, which do weigh down the soul. For by means of the frailty thereof, as a kind of material for certain pains and troubles, the persecutor might constrain her unto ungodliness. From these fetters the Apostle was longing to be unbound, and to be with Christ; Philippians 1:23 but to abide in the flesh was necessary for their sakes unto whom he was ministering the Gospel. Until then this corruptible put on incorruption, and this mortal put on immortality, 1 Corinthians 15:54 like as it were with fetters, the weak flesh does let the willing spirit. Matthew 26:41 These fetters then not any do feel, but they that in themselves do groan being burthened, desiring to be clothed upon with the tabernacle which is from Heaven; 2 Corinthians 5:4 because both death is a terror, and mortal life is sorrow. In behalf of these men groaning the Prophet does redouble his groaning, that their groaning may come in in the sight of the Lord. They also may be understood to be fettered, who are enchained with the precepts of wisdom, the which being patiently supported are turned into ornaments: whence it has been written, Put your feet into her fetters. Sirach 6:24 According to the greatness, he says, of Your arm, receive unto adoption the sons of them that are put to death: or, as is read in some copies, Possess sons by the death of the punished. Wherein the Scripture seems to me to have sufficiently shown, what has been the groan of the fettered, who for the name of Christ endured most grievous persecutions, which in this Psalm are most clearly prophesied. For being beset with various sufferings, they used to pray for the Church, that their blood might not be without fruit to posterity; in order that the Lord's harvest might more abundantly flourish by the very means whereby enemies thought that she would perish. For sons of them that were put to death he has called them who were not only not terrified by the sufferings of those that went before, but in Him for whose name they knew them to have suffered, being inflamed with their glory which did inspire them to the like, in most ample hosts they believed. Therefore he has said, According to the greatness of Your arm. For so great a wonder followed in the case of Christian peoples, as they, who thought they would prevail anything by persecuting her, no wise believed would follow.

16. Render, he says, to our neighbours seven times so much into their bosoms Psalm 78:13. Not any evil things he is wishing, but things just he is foretelling and prophesying as to come. But in the number seven, that is, in sevenfold retribution, he would have the completeness of the punishment to be perceived, for with this number fullness is wont to be signified. Whence also there is this saying for the good, He shall receive in this world seven times as much: which has been put for all. As if having nothing, and possessing all things. 2 Corinthians 6:10 Of neighbours he is speaking, because among them dwells the Church even unto the day of severing: for not now is made the corporal separation. Into their bosoms, he says, as being now in secret, so that the vengeance which is now being executed in secret in this life, hereafter may be known among the nations before our eyes. For when a man is given over to a reprobate mind, in his inward bosom he is receiving what he deserves of future punishments. Their reproach wherewith they have reproached You, O Lord. This do You render to them sevenfold into their bosoms, that is, in return for this reproach, most fully do You rebuke them in their secret places. For in this they have reproached Your Name, thinking to efface You from the earth in Your servants.

17. But we Your people Psalm 78:14, must be taken generally of all the race of godly and true Christians. We, then, whom they thought they had power to destroy, Your people, and the sheep of your flock: in order that he that glories may glory in the Lord, 1 Corinthians 1:31 will confess to You for an age. But some copies have it, will confess to You for everlasting. Out of a Greek ambiguity this diversity has arisen. For that which the Greek has, ἡμῶν ἡλικίαν, ἡλικίαν ἡμῶν ἡλικίαν ἡμῶν ἡλικίαν, may be interpreted both by for everlasting, and for an age; but according to the context we must understand which is the better interpretation. The sense then of this passage seems to me to show, that we ought to say for an age, that is, even unto the end of time. But the following verse after the manner of the Scriptures, and especially of the Psalms, is a repetition of the former with the order changed, putting that before which in the former case was after, and that after which in the former case was before. For whereas in the former case there had been said, we will confess to You, instead of the same herein has been said, We will proclaim Your praise. And so whereas in the former case there had been said, for an age, instead of the same herein has been said, for generation and generation. For this repetition of generation does signify perpetuity: or, as some understand it, it is because there are two generations, an old and a new....But in many places of holy Scriptures we have already made known to you that confession is also put for praise: as in this passage it is, These words you shall say in confession, 'That the works of the Lord are very good.' Sirach 39:33 And especially that which the Saviour Himself says, who had not any sin at all, which by repentance to confess: I confess to You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them to babes. Matthew 11:25 I have said this, in order that it may be more clearly perceived how in the expression, We will proclaim Your praise, the same has been repeated as had been said higher up, We will confess to You.

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