

Exposition on Psalm 8

by St. Augustine

St. Augustine's exposition on Psalm 8 explores the majesty of God, the role of the Church, and the significance of humanity in relation to divine glory.

Scripture: Psalm 8:1, Matthew 11:25, Matthew 21:16, Matthew 26:29, Luke 3:17, John 19:29, 1 Corinthians 2:6, 1 Corinthians 3:1, Ephesians 3:17, Hebrews 2:8

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Divine Wisdom"

Description

St. Augustine delves into the symbolic meanings of wine-presses in the Psalms, interpreting them as representations of Churches, martyrdoms, and the process of separating the good from the bad within the Church. He explores the significance of wine-presses as places of spiritual refinement and growth, where worldly influences are separated from the faithful through the work of God's ministers. Augustine also reflects on the Divine Word being likened to grapes, emphasizing the importance of spiritual knowledge being enclosed within the husks of human understanding and gradually maturing into sound wisdom.

Transcript

To the end, for the wine-presses, a psalm of David himself.

1. He seems to say nothing of wine-presses in the text of the Psalm of which this is the title. By which it appears, that one and the same thing is often signified in Scripture by many and various similitudes. We may then take wine-presses to be Churches, on the same principle by which we understand also by a threshing-floor the Church. For whether in the threshing-floor, or in the wine-press, there is nothing else done but the clearing the produce of its covering; which is necessary, both for its first growth and increase, and arrival at the maturity either of the harvest or the vintage. Of these coverings or supporters then; that is, of chaff, on the threshing-floor, the grain; and of husks, in the presses, the wine is stripped: as in the Churches, from the multitude of worldly men, which is collected together with the good, for whose birth and adaptating to the divine word that multitude was necessary, this is effected, that by spiritual love they be separated through the operation of God's ministers. For now so it is that the good are, for a time, separated from the bad, not in space, but in affection: although they have converse together in the Churches, as far as respects bodily presence. But another time will come, the grain will be stored up apart in the granaries, and the wine in the cellars. The wheat, says he, He will lay up in garners; but the chaff He will burn with fire unquenchable. Luke 3:17 The same thing may be thus understood in another similitude: the wine He will lay up in cellars, but the husks He will cast forth to cattle: so that by the bellies of the cattle

we may be allowed by way of similitude to understand the pains of hell.

2. There is another interpretation concerning the wine-presses, yet still keeping to the meaning of Churches. For even the Divine Word may be understood by the grape: for the Lord even has been called a Cluster of grapes; which they that were sent before by the people of Israel brought from the land of promise hanging on a staff, crucified as it were. Numbers 13:23 Accordingly, when the Divine Word makes use of, by the necessity of declaring Himself, the sound of the voice, whereby to convey Himself to the ears of the hearers; in the same sound of the voice, as it were in husks, knowledge, like the wine, is enclosed: and so this grape comes into the ears, as into the pressing machines of the wine-pressers. For there the separation is made, that the sound may reach as far as the ear; but knowledge be received in the memory of those that hear, as it were in a sort of vat; whence it passes into discipline of the conversation and habit of mind, as from the vat into the cellar: where if it do not through negligence grow sour, it will acquire soundness by age. For it grew sour among the Jews, and this sour vinegar they gave the Lord to drink. John 19:29 For that wine, which from the produce of the vine of the New Testament the Lord is to drink with His saints in the kingdom of His Father, Matthew 26:29 must needs be most sweet and most sound.

3. Wine-presses are also usually taken for martyrdoms, as if when they who have confessed the name of Christ have been trodden down by the blows of persecution, their mortal remains as husks remained on earth, but their souls flowed forth into the rest of a heavenly habitation. Nor yet by this interpretation do we depart from the fruitfulness of the Churches. It is sung then, for the wine-presses, for the Church's establishment; when our Lord after His resurrection ascended into heaven. For then He sent the Holy Ghost: by whom the disciples being fulfilled preached with confidence the Word of God, that Churches might be collected.

4. Accordingly it is said, O Lord, our Lord, how admirable is Your Name in all the earth! Psalm 8:1. I ask, how is His Name wonderful in all the earth? The answer is, For Your glory has been raised above the heavens. So that the meaning is this, O Lord, who art our Lord, how do all that inhabit the earth admire You! For Your glory has been raised from earthly humiliation above the heavens. For hence it appeared who You were that descended, when it was by some seen, and by the rest believed, whither it was that You ascended.

5. Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings You have made perfect praise, because of Your enemies Psalm 8:2. I cannot take babes and sucklings to be any other than those to whom the Apostle says, As unto babes in Christ I have given you milk to drink, not meat. 1 Corinthians 3:1-2 Who were meant by those who went before the Lord praising Him, of whom the Lord Himself used this testimony, when He answered the Jews who bade Him rebuke them, Have ye not read, out of the mouth of babes and sucklings You have made perfect praise? Matthew 21:16 Now with good reason He says not, You have made, but, You have made perfect praise. For there are in the Churches also those who now no more drink milk, but eat meat: whom the same Apostle points out, saying, We speak wisdom among them that are perfect; 1 Corinthians 2:6 but not by those only are the Churches perfected; for if there were only these, little consideration would be had of the human race. But consideration is had, when they too, who are not as yet capable of the knowledge of things spiritual and eternal, are nourished by the faith of the temporal history, which for our salvation after the Patriarchs and Prophets was administered by the most excellent Power and Wisdom of God, even in the Sacrament of the assumed Manhood, in which there is salvation for every one that believes; to the end that moved by Its authority each one may obey Its precepts, whereby being purified and rooted and grounded in love, he may be able to run with Saints, no

more now a child in milk, but a young man in meat, to comprehend the breadth, the length, the height, and depth, to know also the surpassing knowledge of the love of Christ. Ephesians 3:17-19

6. Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings You have made perfect praise, because of Your enemies. By enemies to this dispensation, which has been wrought through Jesus Christ and Him crucified, we ought generally to understand all who forbid belief in things unknown, 1 Corinthians 2:6-10 and promise certain knowledge: as all heretics do, and they who in the superstition of the Gentiles are called philosophers. Not that the promise of knowledge is to be blamed; but because they deem the most healthful and necessary step of faith is to be neglected, by which we must needs ascend to something certain, which nothing but that which is eternal can be. Hence it appears that they do not possess even this knowledge, which in contempt of faith they promise; seeing that they know not so useful and necessary a step thereof. Out of the mouth, then of babes and sucklings You have made perfect praise, You, our Lord, declaring first by the Apostle, Unless you believe, you shall not understand; and saying by His own mouth, Blessed are they that have not seen, and shall believe. John 20:29 Because of the enemies: against whom too that is said, I confess to You, O Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hid these things from the wise, and revealed them unto babes. Matthew 11:25 From the wise, he says, not the really wise, but those who deem themselves such. That You may destroy the enemy and the defender. Whom but the heretic? For he is both an enemy and a defender, who when he would assault the Christian faith, seems to defend it. Although the philosophers too of this world may be well taken as the enemies and defenders: forasmuch as the Son of God is the Power and Wisdom of God by which every one is enlightened who is made wise by the truth: of which they profess themselves to be lovers, whence too their name of philosophers; and therefore they seem to defend it, while they are its enemies, since they cease not to recommend noxious superstitions, that the elements of this world should be worshipped and revered.

7. For I shall see Your heavens, the works of Your fingers Psalm 8:3. We read that the law was written with the finger of God, and given through Moses, His holy servant: by which finger of God many understand the Holy Ghost. Wherefore if, by the fingers of God, we are right in understanding these same ministers filled with the Holy Ghost, by reason of this same Spirit which works in them, since by them all holy Scripture has been completed for us; we understand consistently with this, that, in this place, the books of both Testaments are called the heavens. Now it is said too of Moses himself, by the magicians of king Pharaoh, when they were conquered by him, This is the finger of God. Exodus 8:19 And what is written, The heavens shall be rolled up as a book. Although it be said of this Æthereal heaven, yet naturally, according to the same image, the heavens of books are named by allegory. For I shall see, he says, the heavens, the works of Your fingers: that is, I shall discern and understand the Scriptures, which You, by the operation of the Holy Ghost, hast written by Your ministers.

8. Accordingly the heavens named above also may be interpreted as the same books, where he says, For Your glory has been raised above the heavens: so that the complete meaning should be this, For Your glory has been raised above the heavens; for Your glory has exceeded the declarations of all the Scriptures: Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings You have made perfect praise, that they should begin by belief in the Scriptures, who would arrive at the knowledge of Your glory: which has been raised above the Scriptures, in that it passes by and transcends the announcements of all words and languages. Therefore has God lowered the Scriptures even to the capacity of babes and sucklings, as it is sung in another Psalm, And He lowered the heaven, and came down: and this did He because of the enemies, who through pride of talkativeness, being enemies of the cross of Christ, even when they do speak some truth, still cannot profit babes and sucklings. So is the enemy and defender destroyed, who, whether he

seem to defend wisdom, or even the name of Christ, still, from the step of this faith, assaults that truth, which he so readily makes promise of. Whereby too he is convicted of not possessing it; since by assaulting the step thereof, namely faith, he knows not how one should mount up thereto. Hence then is the rash and blind promiser of truth, who is the enemy and defender, destroyed, when the heavens, the works of God's fingers, are seen, that is, when the Scriptures, brought down even to the slowness of babes, are understood; and by means of the lowness of the faith of the history, which was transacted in time, they raise them, well nurtured and strengthened, unto the grand height of the understanding of things eternal, up to those things which they establish. For these heavens, that is, these books, are the works of God's fingers; for by the operation of the Holy Ghost in the Saints they were completed. For they that have regarded their own glory rather than man's salvation, have spoken without the Holy Ghost, in whom are the bowels of the mercy of God.

9. For I shall see the heavens, the works of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained. The moon and stars are ordained in the heavens; since both the Church universal, to signify which the moon is often put, and Churches in the several places particularly, which I imagine to be intimated by the name of stars, are established in the same Scriptures, which we believe to be expressed by the word heavens. But why the moon justly signifies the Church, will be more seasonably considered in another Psalm, where it is said, The sinners have bent their bow, that they may shoot in the obscure moon the upright in heart. 10.

What is man, that You are mindful of him? Or the son of man, that You visit him? Psalm 8:4. It may be asked, what distinction there is between man and son of man. For if there were none, it would not be expressed thus, man, or son of man, disjunctively. For if it were written thus, What is man, that You are mindful of him, and son of man, that You visit him? it might appear to be a repetition of the word man. But now when the expression is, man or son of-man, a distinction is more clearly intimated.

This is certainly to be remembered, that every son of man is a man; although every man cannot be taken to be a son of man. Adam, for instance, was a man, but not a son of man. Wherefore we may from hence consider and distinguish what is the difference in this place between man and son of man; namely, that they who bear the image of the earthy man, who is not a son of man, should be signified by the name of men; but that they who bear the image of the heavenly Man, 1 Corinthians 15:49 should be rather called sons of men; for the former again is called the old man and the latter the new; but the new is born of the old, since spiritual regeneration is begun by a change of an earthy, and worldly life; and therefore the latter is called son of man.

Man then in this place is earthy, but son of man heavenly; and the former is far removed from God, but the latter present with God; and therefore is He mindful of the former, as in far distance from Him; but the latter He visits, with whom being present He enlightens him with His countenance. For salvation is far from sinners; and, The light of Your countenance has been stamped upon us, O Lord. So in another Psalm he says, that men in conjunction with beasts are made whole together with these beasts, not by any present inward illumination, but by the multiplication of the mercy of God, whereby His goodness reaches even to the lowest things; for the wholeness of carnal men is carnal, as of the beasts; but separating the sons of men from those whom being men he joined with cattle, he proclaims that they are made blessed, after a far more exalted method, by the enlightening of the truth itself, and by a certain inundation of the fountain of life.

For he speaks thus: Men and beasts You will make whole, O Lord, as Your mercy has been multiplied, O God. But the sons of men shall put their trust in the covering of Your wings. They shall be inebriated with the richness of Your house, and of the torrent of Your pleasures You shall make them drink. For with You is the fountain of life, and in Your light shall we see light. Extend Your mercy to them that know You. Through the multiplication of mercy then He is mindful of man, as of beasts; for that multiplied mercy reaches even to them that are afar off; but He visits the son of man, over whom, placed under the covering of His wings, He extends mercy, and in His light gives light, and makes him drink of His pleasures, and inebriates him with the richness of His house, to forget the sorrows and the wanderings of his former conversation.

This son of man, that is, the new man, the repentance of the old man begets with pain and tears. He, though new, is nevertheless called yet carnal, while he is fed with milk; I would not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, says the Apostle. And to show that they were already regenerate, he says, As unto babes in Christ, I have given you milk to drink, not meat. And when he relapses, as often happens, to the old life, he hears in reproof that he is a man; Are ye not men, he says, and walk as men? 11.

Therefore was the son of man first visited in the person of the very Lord Man, born of the Virgin Mary. Of whom, by reason of the very weakness of the flesh, which the Wisdom of God vouchsafed to bear, and the humiliation of the Passion, it is justly said, You have lowered Him a little lower than the Angels Psalm 8:5. But that glorifying is added, in which He rose and ascended up into heaven; With glory, he says, and with honour have You crowned Him; and hast set Him over the works of Your hands Psalm 8:6.

Since even Angels are the works of God's hands, even over Angels we understand the Only-begotten Son to have been set; whom we hear and believe, by the humiliation of the carnal generation and passion, to have been lowered a little lower than the Angels.

12. You have put, he says, all things in subjection under His feet. When he says, all things, he excepts nothing. And that he might not be allowed to understand it otherwise, the Apostle enjoins it to be believed thus, when he says, He being excepted which put all things under Him. 1 Corinthians 15:27 And to the Hebrews he uses this very testimony from this Psalm, when he would have it to be understood that all things are in such sort put under our Lord Jesus Christ, as that nothing should be excepted.

Hebrews 2:8 And yet he does not seem, as it were, to subjoin any great thing, when he says, All sheep and oxen, yea, moreover, the beasts of the field, birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, which walk through the paths of the sea Psalm 8:7. For, leaving the heavenly excellencies and powers, and all the hosts of Angels, leaving even man himself, he seems to have put under Him the beasts merely; unless by sheep and oxen we understand holy souls, either yielding the fruit of innocence, or even working that the earth may bear fruit, that is, that earthly men may be regenerated unto spiritual richness.

By these holy souls then we ought to understand not those of men only, but of all Angels too, if we would gather from hence that all things are put under our Lord Jesus Christ. For there will be no creature that will not be put under Him, under whom the pre-eminent spirits, that I may so speak, are put. But whence shall we prove that sheep can be interpreted even, not of men, but of the blessed spirits of the angelical creatures on high? May we from the Lord's saying that He had left ninety and nine sheep in the mountains, that is, in the higher regions, and had come down for one?

For if we take the one lost sheep to be the human soul in Adam, since Eve even was made out of his side, Genesis 2:21-22 for the spiritual handling and consideration of all which things this is not the time, it

remains that, by the ninety and nine left in the mountains, spirits not human, but angelical, should be meant. For as regards the oxen, this sentence is easily dispatched; since men themselves are for no other reason called oxen, but because by preaching the Gospel of the word of God they imitate Angels, as where it is said, You shall not muzzle the ox that treads out the grain.

How much more easily then do we take the Angels themselves, the messengers of truth, to be oxen, when Evangelists by the participation of their title are called oxen? You have put under therefore, he says, all sheep and oxen, that is, all the holy spiritual creation; in which we include that of holy men, who are in the Church, in those wine-presses to wit, which are intimated under the other similitude of the moon and stars. 13. Yea moreover, says he, the beasts of the field.

The addition of moreover is by no means idle. First, because by beasts of the plain may be understood both sheep and oxen: so that, if goats are the beasts of rocky and mountainous regions, sheep may be well taken to be the beasts of the field. Accordingly had it been written even thus, all sheep and oxen and beasts of the field; it might be reasonably asked what beasts of the plain meant, since even sheep and oxen could be taken as such. But the addition of moreover besides, obliges us, beyond question, to recognise some difference or another.

But under this word, moreover, not only beasts of the field, but also birds of the air, and fish of the sea, which walk through the paths of the sea Psalm 8:8, are to be taken in. What is then this distinction? Call to mind the wine-presses, holding husks and wine; and the threshing-floor, containing chaff and grain; and the nets, in which were enclosed good fish and bad; and the ark of Noah, in which were both unclean and clean animals: and you will see that the Churches for a while, now in this time, unto the last time of judgment, contain not only sheep and oxen, that is, holy laymen and holy ministers, but moreover beasts of the field, birds of the air, and birds of the sea, that walk through the paths of the sea.

For the beasts of the field were very fitly understood, as men rejoicing in the pleasure of the flesh where they mount up to nothing high, nothing laborious. For the field is also the broad way, that leads to destruction: Matthew 7:13 and in a field is Abel slain. Genesis 4:8 Wherefore there is cause to fear, lest one coming down from the mountains of God's righteousness (for your righteousness, he says, is as the mountains of God) making choice of the broad and easy paths of carnal pleasure, be slain by the devil.

See now too the birds of heaven, the proud, of whom it is said, They have set their mouth against the heaven. See how they are carried on high by the wind, who say, We will magnify our tongue, our lips are our own, who is our Lord? Behold too the fish of the sea, that is, the curious; who walk through the paths of the sea, that is, search in the deep after the temporal things of this world: which, like paths in the sea, vanish and perish, as quickly as the water comes together again after it has given room, in their passage, to ships, or to whatsoever walks or swims.

For he said not merely, who walk the paths of the sea; but walk through, he said; showing the very determined earnestness of those who seek after vain and fleeting things. Now these three kinds of vice, namely, the pleasure of the flesh, and pride, and curiosity, include all sins. And they appear to me to be enumerated by the Apostle John, when he says, Love not the world; for all that is in the world is the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. 1 John 2:15-16 For through the eyes especially prevails curiosity.

To what the rest indeed belong is clear. And that temptation of the Lord Man was threefold: by food, that is, by the lust of the flesh, where it is suggested, command these stones that they be made bread:

Matthew 4:3 by vain boasting, where, when stationed on a mountain, all the kingdoms of this earth are shown Him, and promised if He would worship: Matthew 4:8-9 by curiosity, where, from the pinnacle of the temple, He is advised to cast Himself down, for the sake of trying whether He would be borne up by Angels.

Matthew 4:6 And accordingly after that the enemy could prevail with Him by none of these temptations, this is said of him, When the devil had ended all his temptation. Luke 4:13 With a reference then to the meaning of the wine-presses, not only the wine, but the husks too are put under His feet; to wit, not only sheep and oxen, that is, the holy souls of believers, either in the laity, or in the ministry; but moreover both beasts of pleasure, and birds of pride, and fish of curiosity.

All which classes of sinners we see mingled now in the Churches with the good and holy. May He work then in His Churches, and separate the wine from the husks: let us give heed, that we be wine, and sheep or oxen; not husks, or beasts of the field, or birds of heaven, or fish of the sea, which walk through the paths of the sea. Not that these names can be understood and explained in this way only, but the explanation of them must be according to the place where they are found.

For elsewhere they have other meanings. And this rule must be kept to in every allegory, that what is expressed by the similitude should be considered agreeably to the meaning of the particular place: for this is the manner of the Lord's and the Apostles' teaching. Let us repeat then the last verse, which is also put at the beginning of the Psalm, and let us praise God, saying, O Lord our Lord, how wonderful is Your name in all the earth! For fitly, after the matter of the discourse, is the return made to the heading, whither all that discourse must be referred.

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