

Exposition on Psalm 81

by St. Augustine

The sermon emphasizes the importance of spiritual things and the need to prioritize the spiritual over the material, and warns against idolatry and the worship of new gods.

Scripture: Exodus 17:6, Psalm 80:1, Psalm 80:16, Matthew 11:28, 1 Corinthians 3:12

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Faith Formation"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the Psalms, focusing on the symbolism of the presses as representing the mystery of the Church, where believers are under pressure but can choose to be like oil that is strained out for God. He emphasizes the importance of surrendering to God's will and not being swayed by worldly distractions or false gods. St. Augustine encourages believers to exult in God, to take in spiritual nourishment, and to boldly preach the word of God without fear. He warns against following the affections of the heart and urges believers to build their foundation on Christ to be saved through the refining fire.

Transcript

1. For a Title this Psalm has, Unto the end for the presses, on the fifth of the Sabbath, a Psalm to Asaph himself. Into one title many mysteries are heaped together, still so that the lintel of the Psalm indicates the things within. As we have to speak of the presses, let no one expect that we shall speak of a vat, of a press, of olive baskets; because neither the Psalm has this, and therefore it indicates the greater mystery....

No such thing did ye hear in this when it was reading. Therefore take the presses for the mystery of the Church, which is now transacting. In the presses we observe three things, pressure, and of the pressure two things, one to be laid up, the other to be thrown away. There takes place then in the press a treading, a crushing, a weight: and with these the oil strains out secretly into the vat, the lees run openly down the streets.

Look intently on this great spectacle. For God ceases not to exhibit to us that which we may look upon with great joy, nor is the madness of the Circus to be compared with this spectacle. That belongs to the lees, this to the oil. When therefore ye hear the blasphemers babble impudently and say that distresses abound in Christian times; for you know that they love to say this: and it is an old proverb, yet one that began from Christian times, God gives no rain; count it to the Christians! Although it was those of old that said thus. But these now say also, That God sends rain, count it to the Christians! God sends no rain; we sow not. God sends rain; we reap not! And they wilfully make that an occasion of showing pride, which ought to

make them more earnest in supplication, choosing rather to blaspheme than to pray.

When therefore they talk of such things, when they make such boasts, when they say these things, and say them in defiance, not with fear, but with loftiness, let them not disturb you. For suppose that pressures abound; be thou oil. Let the lees, black with the darkness of ignorance, be insolent; and let it, as though cast away in the streets, go gibing publicly: but do thou by yourself in your heart, where He who sees in secret will requite you, strain off into the vat.

...To name some one thing about which even they murmur who make them: How great plunderings, they say, are there in our times, how great distresses of the innocent, how great robberies of other men's goods! Thus indeed you take notice of the lees, that other men's goods are seized; to the oil you give no heed, that to the poor are given even men's own. The old time had no such plunderers of other men's goods: but the old time had no such givers of their own goods....

2. Wherefore also on the fifth of the sabbath? What is this? Let us go back to the first works of God, if perchance we may not there find somewhat in which we may also understand a mystery. For the sabbath is the seventh day, on which God rested from all His works, Genesis 2:2 intimating the great mystery of our future resting from all our works. First of the sabbath then is called that first day, which we also call the Lord's day; second of the sabbath, the second day;...and the sabbath itself the seventh day. See ye therefore to whom this Psalm speaks. For it seems to me that it speaks to the baptized. For on the fifth day God from the waters created animals: on the fifth day, that is, on the fifth of the sabbath, God said, Let the waters bring forth creeping things of living souls. Genesis 1:20 See ye, therefore, you in whom the waters have already brought forth creeping things of living souls. For you belong to the presses, and in you, whom the waters have brought forth, one thing is strained out, another is thrown away. For there are many that live not worthily of the baptism which they have received. For how many that are baptized have chosen rather to be filling the Circus than this Basilica! How many that are baptized are either making booths in the streets, or complaining that they are not made!

But this Psalm, For the presses, and on the fifth of the sabbath, is sung unto Asaph. Asaph was a certain man called by this name, as Idithun, as Core, as other names that we find in the titles of the Psalms: yet the interpretation of this name intimates the mystery of a hidden truth. Asaph, in fact, in Latin is interpreted congregation. Therefore, For the presses, on the fifth of the sabbath, it is sung unto Asaph, that is, for a distinguishing pressure, to the baptized, born again of water, the Psalm is sung to the Lord's congregation. We have read the title on the lintel, and have understood what it means by these presses. Now if you please let us see the very house of the composition, that is, the interior of the press. Let us enter, look in, rejoice, fear, desire, avoid. For all these things you are to find in this inward house, that is, in the text of the Psalm itself, when we shall have begun to read, and, with the Lord's help, to speak what He grants us.

3. Behold yourselves, O Asaph, congregation of the Lord. Exult ye unto God our helper Psalm 80:1. You who are gathered together today, you are this day the congregation of the Lord, if indeed unto you the Psalm is sung, Exult ye unto God our helper. Others exult unto the Circus, you unto God: others exult unto their deceiver, do ye exult unto your helper: others exult unto their god their belly, do ye exult unto your God your helper. Jubilate unto the God of Jacob. Because ye also belong to Jacob: yea, you are Jacob, the younger people to which the elder is servant. Genesis 25:23 Jubilate unto the God of Jacob. Whatsoever ye cannot explain in words, you do not therefore forbear exulting: what you shall be able to explain, cry out: what ye cannot, jubilate. For from the abundance of joys, he that cannot find words sufficient, uses to break out into jubilating; Jubilate unto the God of Jacob.

4. Take the Psalm and give the tabret Psalm 80:2. Both take, and give. What is, take? What, give? Take the Psalm, and give the tabret. The Apostle Paul says in a certain place, Philippians 4:15 reproving and grieving, that no one had communicated with him in the matter of giving and receiving. What is, in the matter of giving and receiving, but that which he has openly set forth in another place. 1 Corinthians 9:11 If we have sowed unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we reap your carnal things. And it is true that a tabret, which is made of hide, belongs to the flesh. The Psalm, therefore, is spiritual, the tabret, carnal. Therefore, people of God, congregation of God, take ye the Psalm, and give the tabret: take ye spiritual things, and give carnal. This also is what at that blessed Martyr's table we exhorted you, that receiving spiritual things ye should give carnal. For these which are built for the time, are needful for receiving the bodies either of the living or of the dead, but in time that is passing by. Shall we after God's judgment take up these buildings to Heaven? Yet without these we shall not be able to do at this time the things which belong to the possessing of Heaven. If therefore you are eager in getting spiritual things, be ye devout in expending carnal things. Take the Psalm, and give the tabret: take our voice, return your hands.

5. The pleasant psaltery, with the harp. I remember that we once intimated to your charity the difference of psaltery and harp.. ..For heavenly is the preaching of the word of God. But if we wait for heavenly things, let us not be sluggish in working at earthly things; because, the psaltery is pleasant, but, with the harp. The same is expressed in another way as above, Take the Psalm, and give the tabret: here for Psalm, is put psaltery, for tabret, harp. Of this, however, we are admonished, that to the preaching of God's word we make answer by bodily works.

6. Sound the trumpet Psalm 80:3. This is, Loudly and boldly preach, be not affrighted! As the Prophet says in a certain place, Cry out, and lift up as with a trumpet your voice. Isaiah 58:1 Sound the trumpet in the beginning of the month of the trumpet. It was ordered, that in the beginning of the month there should be a sounding of the trumpet: and this even now the Jews do in bodily sort, after the spirit they understand it not. For the beginning of the month, is the new moon: the new moon, is the new life. What is the new moon? If any, then, is in Christ, he is a new creature. 2 Corinthians 5:17 What is, sound the trumpet in the beginning of the month of the trumpet? With all confidence preach ye the new life, fear not the noise of the old life.

7. Because it is a commandment for Israel, and a judgment for the God of Jacob Psalm 80:4. Where a commandment, there judgment. For, They that have sinned in the Law, by the Law shall be judged. Romans 2:12 And the very Giver of the commandment, the Lord Christ, the Word made flesh, says, For judgment I have come into the world, that they that see not may see, and they that see may be made blind. John 9:39 What is, That they that see not may see, they that see be made blind, but that the lowly be exalted, the proud thrown down? For not they that see are to be made blind, but those who to themselves seem to see are to be convicted of blindness. This is brought about in the mystery of the press, that they who see may not see, and they that see be made blind.

8. A testimony in Joseph He made that Psalm 80:5. Look you, brethren, what is it? Joseph is interpreted augmentation. You remember, you know of Joseph sold into Egypt: Joseph sold into Egypt is Christ passing over to the Gentiles. There Joseph after tribulations was exalted, and here Christ, after the suffering of the Martyrs, was glorified. Thenceforth to Joseph the Gentiles rather belong, and thenceforth augmentation; because, Many are the children of her that was desolate, rather than of her that has the husband. Isaiah 54:1 He made it, till he should go out of the land of Egypt. Observe that also here the fifth of the sabbath is signified: when Joseph went out from the land of Egypt, that is, the people multiplied through Joseph, he was caused to pass through the Red Sea. Therefore then also the waters brought

forth creeping things of living souls. Genesis 1:20 No other thing was it that there in figure the passage of that people through the sea foreshowed, than the passing of the Faithful through Baptism; the apostle is witness: for I would not have you ignorant, brethren, he said, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 1 Corinthians 10:1-2 Nothing else then the passing through the sea did signify, but the Sacrament of the baptized; nothing else the pursuing Egyptians, but the multitude of past sins. You see most evident mysteries. The Egyptians press, they urge; so then sins follow close, but no farther than to the water. Why then do you fear, who hast not yet come, to come to the Baptism of Christ, to pass through the Red Sea? What is Red? Consecrated with the Blood of the Lord. Why do you fear to come? The consciousness, perhaps, of some huge offenses goads and tortures in you your mind, and says to you that it is so great a thing you have committed, that you may despair to have it remitted you. Fear lest there remain anything of your sins, if there lived any one of the Egyptians! Exodus 14:29-30

But when you shall have passed the Red Sea, when you shall have been led forth out of your offenses with a mighty hand and with a strong arm, you will perceive mysteries that you know not: since Joseph himself too, when he came out of the land of Egypt, heard a language which he knew not. You shall hear a language which you know not: which they that know now hear and recognise, bearing witness and knowing. You shall hear where you ought to have your heart: which just now when I said many understood and answered by acclamation, the rest stood mute, because they have not heard the language which they knew not. Let them hasten, then, let them pass over, let them learn.

9. He turned away from burdens his back Psalm 80:6. Who turned away from burdens his back, but He that cried, Come unto Me, all you that labour and are heavy laden? Matthew 11:28 In another manner this same thing is signified. What the pursuit of the Egyptians did, the same thing do the burdens of sins. As if you should say, From what burdens? His hands in the basket did serve. By the basket are signified servile works; to cleanse, to manure, to carry earth, is done with a basket, such works are servile: because every one that does sin, is the slave of sin; and if the Son shall have made you free, then will you be free indeed. John 8:34-36 Justly also are the rejected things of the world counted as baskets, but even baskets did God fill with morsels; Twelve baskets Matthew 14:20 did He fill with morsels; because He chose the rejected things of this world to confound the things that were mighty. 1 Corinthians 1:27 But also when with the basket Joseph did serve, he then carried earth, because he did make bricks. His hands in the basket did serve.

10. In tribulation you called on Me, and I delivered you Psalm 80:8. Let each Christian conscience recognise itself, if it have devoutly passed the Red Sea, if with faith in believing and observing it has heard a strange language which it knew not, let it recognise itself as having been heard in its tribulation. For that was a great tribulation, to be weighed down with loads of sins. How does the conscience, lifted from the earth, rejoice. Lo, you are baptized, your conscience which was yesterday overladen, today rejoices you. You have been heard in tribulation, remember your tribulation. Before you came to the water, what anxiety did you bear on you! What fastings did you practise! What tribulations did you carry in your heart! What inward, pious, devout prayers! Slain are your enemies; all your sins are blotted out. In tribulation you called upon Me, and I delivered you.

11. I heard you in the hidden part of the tempest. Not in a tempest of the sea, but in a tempest of the heart. I proved you in the water of contradiction. Truly, brethren, truly, he that was heard in the hidden part of the tempest ought to be proved in the water of contradiction. For when he has believed, when he has been baptized, when he has begun to go in the way of God, when he has striven to be strained into the vat, and

has drawn himself out from the lees that run in the street, he will have many disturbers, many insulters, many detractors, many discouragers, many that even threaten where they can, that deter, that depress. This is all the water of contradiction. I suppose there are some here today, for instance, I think it likely there are some here whom their friends wished to hurry away to the circus, and to I know not what triflings of this day's festivity: perchance they have brought those persons with them to church. But whether they have brought those with them, or whether they have by them not permitted themselves to be led away to the circus, in the water of contradiction have they been tried. Do not then be ashamed to proclaim what you know, to defend even among blasphemers what you have believed....However much the bad that are aliens may rage, O that our own bad people would not help them!

You recollect what was said of Christ, that He was thus born for the fall of many, and the rising again of many, and for a sign to be spoken against. Luke 2:34 We know, we see: the sign of the Cross has been set up, and it has been spoken against. There has been speaking against the glory of the Cross: but there was a title over the Cross which was not to be corrupted. For there is a title in the Psalm, For the inscription of the title, corrupt thou not. It was a sign to be spoken against: for the Jews said, Make it not, King of the Jews, but make it, that He said I am the King of the Jews. John 19:21 Conquered was the contradiction; it was answered, What I have written, I have written.

12. All this, from the beginning of the Psalm up to this verse, we have heard of the oil of the press. What remains is rather for grief and warning: for it belongs to the lees of the press, even to the end; perchance also not without a meaning in the interposition of the Diapsalma. But even this too is profitable to hear, that he who sees himself already of the oil may rejoice; he that is in danger of running among the lees may beware. To both give heed, choose the one, fear the other.

Hear, O My people, and I will speak, and will bear witness unto you Psalm 80:8. For it is not to a strange people, not to a people that belongs not to the press: Judge ye, He says, between Me and My vineyard. Isaiah 5:3

13. Israel, if you shall have heard Me, there shall not be in you any new god Psalm 80:9. A new god is one made for the time: but our God is not new, but from eternity to eternity. And our Christ is new, perchance, as Man, but eternal God. For what before the beginning? And truly, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1 And our Christ Himself is the Word made flesh, that He might dwell in us. John 1:14 Far be it, then, that there should be in any one a new god. A new god is either a stone or a phantom. He is not, says one, a stone; I have a silver and a gold one. Justly did he choose to name the very costly things, who said, The idols of the nations are silver and gold. Great are they, because they are of gold and silver; costly they are, shining they are; but yet, Eyes they have, and see not! New are these gods. What newer than a god out of a workshop? Yea, though those now old ones spiders' webs have covered over, they that are not eternal are new. So much for the Pagans.. ..

14. For if there be error in you, You will not worship a strange god. If you think not of a false god, you will not worship a manufactured god: for there will not be in you any strange god. For I am. Why would you adore what is not? For I am the Lord your God Psalm 80:10. Because I am I that Am, and indeed I Am He says, I that Am, over every creature: yet to you what good have I afforded in time? Who brought you out of the land of Egypt. Not to that people alone is it said. For we all were brought out of the land of Egypt, we have all passed through the Red Sea; our enemies pursuing us have perished in the water. Let us not be ungrateful to our God; let us not forget God that abides, and fabricate in ourselves a new god. I, who led you out of the land of Egypt, says God. Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it. You suffer straitness in

yourself because of the new god set up in your heart; break the vain image, cast down from your conscience the feigned idol: open wide your mouth, in confessing, in loving: and I will fill it, because with me is the fountain of life.

15. And My people obeyed not My voice Psalm 80:11. For He would not speak these things except to His own people. For, we know that whatsoever things the Law says, it says to them that are in the Law. Romans 3:19 And Israel did not listen to Me. Who? To whom? Israel to Me. O ungrateful soul! Through Me the soul, by Me the soul called, by Me brought back to hope, by Me washed from sins! And Israel did not listen to Me! For they are baptized and pass through the Red Sea: but on the way they murmur, gainsay, complain, are stirred with seditions, ungrateful to Him who delivered them from pursuing enemies, who leads through the dry land, through the desert, yet with food and drink, with light by night and shade by day.

16. And I let them go according to the affections of their heart Psalm 80:12. Behold the press: the orifices are open, the lees run. And I let them go, not according to the healthfulness of My commands; but, according to the affections of their heart: I gave them up to themselves. The Apostle also says, God gave them up to the desires of their own hearts. Romans 1:24 I let them go according to the affection of their heart, they shall go in their own affections. There is what ye shudder at, if at least you are straining out into the hidden vats of the Lord, if at least you have conceived a hearty love for His storehouses, there is what ye shudder at. Some stand up for the circus, some for the amphitheatre, some for the booths in the streets some for the theatres, some for this, some for that, some finally for their new gods; they shall go in their own affections.

17. If My people would have heard Me, if Israel would have walked in My ways Psalm 80:13. For perchance that Israel says, Behold I sin, it is manifest, I go after the affections of my own heart: but what can I do? The devil does this. Demons do this. What is the devil? Who are the demons? Certainly your enemies. Unto nothing all their enemies I would have brought down; and on them that oppress them I would have sent forth My hand Psalm 80:14. But now what have they to do to complain of enemies? Themselves have become the worse enemies. For how? What follows? Of enemies ye complain, yourselves, what are you?

18. The enemies of God have lied unto Him Psalm 80:15. Do you renounce? I renounce. And he returns to what he renounced. In fact, what things do you renounce, except bad deeds, diabolical deeds, deeds to be condemned of God, thefts, plunderings, perjuries, manslayings, adulteries, sacrileges, abominable rites, curious arts.. ..

19. If therefore all those works shall not possess the kingdom of God (yea not the works, but they that do such things; Galatians 5:21 for such works there shall be none in the fire: for they shall not, while burning in that fire, be committing theft or adultery; but they that do such things shall not possess the kingdom of God); they shall not therefore be on the right hand, with those to whom it shall be said, Come, you blessed of My Father, receive the kingdom: because, they that do such things shall not possess the kingdom of God. If therefore on the right they shall not be, there remains not but that they must be on the left. To those on the left what shall He say? Go ye into eternal fire. Because, their time shall be for ever.

20. Explain to us, then, says one, how those that build wood, hay, stubble, on the foundation, do not perish, but are saved, yet so as by fire? An obscure question indeed that, but as I am able I tell you briefly. Brethren, there are men altogether despisers of this world, to whom nothing is pleasant that flows in the

course of time, they cling not by love to any earthly works, holy, chaste, continent, just, perchance even selling all their goods and distributing to the poor, or possessing as though they possessed not, and using this world as though not using it. 1 Corinthians 7:30-31 But there are others who cling to things allowed to infirmity with a degree of affection. He robs not another of his estate, but so loves his own, that if he loses it he will be disturbed. He does not covet another's wife, but so clings to his own, so cohabits with his own, as not therein to keep the measure prescribed in the laws, for the sake of begetting children. He does not take away other men's things, but reclaims his own, and has a law-suit with his brother. For to such it is said, Now indeed there is altogether a fault among you, because you have law-suits with each other. 1 Corinthians 6:7 But these very suits he orders to be tried in the Church, not to be dragged into court, yet he says they are faults. For a Christian contends for earthly things more than becomes one to whom the kingdom of Heaven is promised. Not the whole of his heart does he raise upward, but some part of it he drags on the earth....Therefore if you love your possession, yet dost not for its sake commit violence, dost not for its sake bear false witness, dost not for its sake commit manslaughter, dost not for its sake swear falsely, dost not for its sake deny Christ: in that you will not for its sake do these things, you have Christ for a foundation. But yet because you love it, and art saddened if you lose it, upon the foundation you have placed, not gold, or silver, or precious stones, but wood, hay, stubble. Saved therefore you will be, when that begins to burn which you have built, yet so as by fire. For let no one on this foundation building adulteries, blasphemies, sacrileges, idolatries, perjuries, think he shall be saved through fire, as though they were the wood, hay, stubble: but he that builds the love of earthly things on the foundation of the kingdom of Heaven, that is upon Christ, his love of temporal things shall be burned, and himself shall be saved through the right foundation.

21. ...And He fed them of the fat of wheat, and from the rock with honey He satisfied them Psalm 80:16. In the wilderness from the rock He brought forth water, Exodus 17:6 not honey. Honey is wisdom, holding the first place for sweetness among the viands of the heart. How many enemies of the Lord, then, that lie unto the Lord, are fed not only of the fat of wheat, but also from the rock with honey, from the wisdom of Christ? How many are delighted with His word, and with the knowledge of His sacraments, with the unfolding of His parables, how many are delighted, how many applaud with clamour! And this honey is not from any chance person, but from the rock. But the Rock was Christ. 1 Corinthians 10:4 How many, then, are satisfied with that honey, cry out, and say, It is sweet; say, Nothing better, nothing sweeter could be thought or said! And yet the enemies of the Lord have lied unto Him. I like not to dwell any more on matters of grief; although the Psalm ends in terror to this purpose, yet from the end of it, I pray you, let us return to the heading: Exult unto God our Helper. Turned unto God.

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