

Exposition on Psalm 82

by St. Augustine

The sermon explores the concept of God's presence in the synagogue of gods, and how Israel's blindness led to the crucifixion of Christ.

Scripture: Psalm 81:1-2, Psalm 81:8, Matthew 11:29, Matthew 15:24

Topics: "Divine Judgment", "Spiritual Righteousness"

Description

St. Augustine delves into the interpretation of Psalms 81, explaining the significance of God standing in the synagogue of gods as a representation of the people of Israel. He contemplates whether it was the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, or the Trinity that stood among the congregation of gods, emphasizing the spiritual presence of God with His creation. The sermon addresses the unrighteous judgment and acceptance of the ungodly, urging listeners to seek righteousness and justice for the fatherless and needy. St. Augustine reflects on the blindness of those who crucified Christ and the need for spiritual understanding to avoid such grave errors.

Transcript

1. This Psalm, like others similarly named, was so entitled either from the name of the man who wrote it, or from the explanation of that same name, so as to refer in meaning to the Synagogue, which Asaph signifies; especially as this is intimated in the first verse. For it begins, God stood in the synagogue of gods Psalm 81:1. Far however be it from us to understand by these Gods the gods of the Gentiles, or idols, or any creature in heaven or earth except men; for a little after this verse the same Psalm relates and explains what Gods it means in whose synagogue God stood, where it says, I have said, You are gods, and you are all the children of the Most High: but you shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes. In the synagogue of these children of the Most High, of whom the same Most High said by the mouth of Isaiah, I have begotten sons and brought them up, but they despised Me, Isaiah 1:2 stood God. By the synagogue we understand the people of Israel, because synagogue is the word properly used of them, although they were also called the Church. Our congregation, on the contrary, the Apostles never called synagogue, but always Ecclesia; whether for the sake of the distinction, or because there is some difference between a congregation whence the synagogue has its name, and a convocation whence the Church is called Ecclesia: for the word congregation (or flocking together) is used of cattle, and particularly of that kind properly called flocks, whereas convocation (or calling together) is more of reasonable creatures, such as men are....I think then that it is clear in what synagogue of gods God stood.

2. The next question is, whether we should understand the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Spirit, or the Trinity, to have stood among the congregation of gods, and in the midst to distinguish the gods; because Each One is God, and the Trinity itself is One God. It is not indeed easy to make this clear, because it cannot be denied that not a bodily but a spiritual presence of God, agreeable to His nature, exists with created things in a wonderful manner, and one which but a few do understand, and that imperfectly: as to God it is said, If I shall ascend into heaven, You are there; if I shall go down into hell, You are there also. Hence it is rightly said, that God stands in the congregation of men invisibly, as He fills heaven and earth, which He asserts of Himself by the Prophet's mouth; Jeremiah 23:24 and He is not only said, but is, in a way, known to stand in those things which He has created, as far as the human mind can conceive, if man also stands and hears Him, and rejoices greatly on account of His voice within. But I think that the Psalm intimates something that took place at a particular time, by God's standing in the congregation of gods. For that standing by which He fills heaven and earth, neither belongs peculiarly to the synagogue, nor varies from time to time. God, therefore, stood in the congregation of gods; that is, He who said of Himself, I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Matthew 15:24 The cause too is mentioned; but in the midst, to judge of the gods....

3. How long will you judge unrighteously, and accept the persons of the ungodly Psalm 81:2; as in another place, How long are you heavy in heart? Until He shall come who is the light of the heart? I have given a law, you have resisted stubbornly: I sent Prophets, you treated them unjustly, or slew them, or connived at those who did so. But if they are not worthy to be even spoken to, who slew the servants of God that were sent to them, you who were silent when these things were doing, that is, you who would imitate as if they were innocent those who then were silent, how long will you judge unrighteously, and accept the persons of the ungodly? If the Heir comes even now, is He to be slain? Was He not willing for your sake to become as it were a child under guardians? Did not He for your sake hunger and thirst like one in need? Did He not cry to you, Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart? Matthew 11:29 Did He not become poor, when He was rich, that by His poverty we might be made rich? 2 Corinthians 8:9 Give sentence, therefore, for the fatherless and the poor man, justify the humble and needy Psalm 81:3. Not them who for their own sake are rich and proud, but Him who for your sake was humble and poor, believe ye to be righteous: proclaim Him righteous. But they will envy Him, and will not at all spare Him, saying, This is the Heir, come, let us kill Him, and the inheritance shall be ours. Deliver, then, the poor man, and save the needy from the hands of the ungodly Psalm 81:4. This is said that it might be known, that in that nation where Christ was born and put to death, those persons were not guiltless of so great a crime, who being so numerous, that, as the Gospel says, the Jews feared them, and therefore dared not lay hands on Christ, afterwards consented, and permitted Him to be slain by the malicious and envious Jewish rulers: yet if they had so willed, they would still have been feared, so that the hands of the wicked would never have prevailed against Him. For of these it is said elsewhere, Dumb dogs, they know not how to bark. Of them too is that said, Lo, how the righteous perishes, and no man lays it to heart. He perished as far as lay in them who would have Him to perish; for how could He perish by dying, who in that way rather was seeking again what had perished? If then they are justly blamed and deservedly rebuked, who by their dissembling suffered such a wicked deed to be committed; how must they be blamed, or rather not only blamed, but how severely must they be condemned, who did this of design and malice?

4. To all of them, verily, what follows is most fitly suited: They did not know nor understand, they walk on in darkness Psalm 81:5. For if even they had known, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory: 1 Corinthians 2:8 and those others, if they had known, would never have consented to ask that Barabbas should be freed, and Christ should be crucified. But as the above-mentioned blindness happened in part

unto Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles should come in, this blindness of that People having caused the crucifixion of Christ, all the foundations of the earth shall be moved.

So have they been moved, and shall they be moved, until the predestined fullness of the Gentiles shall come in. For at the actual death of the Lord the earth was moved, and the rocks rent. Matthew 27:51 And if we understand by the foundations of the earth those who are rich in the abundance of earthly possessions, it was truly foretold that they should be moved, either by wondering that lowliness, poverty, death, should be so loved and honoured in Christ, when it is to their mind great misery; or even in that themselves should love and follow it, and set at nought the vain happiness of this world.

So are all the foundations of the earth moved, while they partly admire, and partly are even altered. For as without absurdity we call foundations of heaven those on whom the kingdom of heaven is built up in the persons of saints and faithful; whose first foundation is Christ Himself, born of the Virgin, of whom the Apostle says, Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus; 1 Corinthians 3:11 next the Apostles and Prophets themselves, by whose authority the heavenly place is chosen, that by obeying them we may be built together with them; whence he says to the Ephesians, You are built upon the foundation of Apostles and Prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the chief corner stone.

Ephesians 2:20 ...But the kingdom of earthly happiness is pride, to oppose which came the lowliness of Christ, rebuking those whom He wished by lowliness to make the children of the Most High, and blaming them: I said, You are gods, you are all the children of the Most High Psalm 81:6. But you shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes Psalm 81:7. Whether to those He said this, I said, You are gods, and to those particularly who are unpredestined to eternal life; and to the other, But you shall die like men, etc., and shall fall like one of the princes, in this way also distinguishing the gods; or whether He blames all together, in order to distinguish the obedient and those who received correction, I said, You are gods, and you are all the children of the Most High: that is, to all of you I promised celestial happiness, but you, through the infirmity of your flesh, shall die like men, and through haughtiness of soul, like one of the princes, that is, the devil, shall not be exalted, but shall fall.

As if He said: Though the days of your life are so few, that you speedily die like men, this avails not to your correction: but like the devil, whose days are many in this world, because he dies not in the flesh, you are lifted up so that you fall. For by devilish pride it came to pass that the perverse and blind rulers of the Jews envied the glory of Christ: by this will it came to pass, and still does, that the lowliness of Christ crucified unto death is lightly esteemed in the eyes of them who love the excellence of this world.

5. And therefore that this vice may be cured, in the person of the Prophet himself it is said, Arise, O God, and judge the earth Psalm 81:8; for the earth swelled high when it crucified You: rise from the dead, and judge the earth. For You shall destroy among all nations. What, but the earth? That is, destroying those who savour of earthly things, or destroying the feeling itself of earthly lust and pride in believers; or separating those who do not believe, as earth to be trodden under foot and to perish. Thus by His members, whose conversation is in heaven, He judges the earth, and destroys it among all nations. But I must not omit to remark, that some copies have, for You shall inherit among all nations. This too may be understood agreeably to the sense, nor does anything prevent both meanings existing at once. His inheritance takes place by love, which in that He cultivates by His commands and gracious mercy, He destroys earthly desires.

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