

# Exposition on Psalm 83

by St. Augustine

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*The Psalm 83 is a prophetic prayer for the enemies of God's people to be made ashamed and to seek God's name.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 3:19, Exodus 3:14, Psalm 82:1, Isaiah 53:12, Luke 20:35, Romans 8:31, 1 Corinthians 1:20, 1 Corinthians 3:17, Ephesians 6:12, Philippians 2:7, 2 Thessalonians 2:4

**Topics:** "Psalm Interpretation", "Gods Judgment"

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## Description

St. Augustine delves into Psalm 82, interpreting it as a reflection of the congregation of God's people, comparing the Jewish people to the Synagogue and the Christian people to the Church. He highlights the prophetic nature of the Psalm, pointing to Christ as the ultimate judge and the enemies of God who will face judgment. Augustine emphasizes the importance of seeking God's name and the ultimate victory of God over His enemies, leading to their shame and destruction for those who do not seek His name.

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## Transcript

1. Of this Psalm the title is, A song of a Psalm of Asaph. We have already often said what is the interpretation of Asaph, that is, congregation. That man, therefore, who was called Asaph, is named in representation of the congregation of God's people in the titles of many Psalms. But in Greek, congregation is called synagogue, which has come to be held for a kind of proper name for the Jewish people, that it should be called The Synagogue; even as the Christian people is more usually called The Church, in that it too is congregated.

2. The people of God, then, in this Psalm says, O God, who shall be like You? Psalm 82:1. Which I suppose to be more fitly taken of Christ, because, being made in the likeness of men, Philippians 2:7 He was thought by those by whom He was despised to be comparable to other men: for He was even reckoned among the unrighteous, Isaiah 53:12 but for this purpose, that He might be judged. But when He shall come to judge, then shall be done what is here said, O God, who is like You? For if the Psalms did not use to speak to the Lord Christ, that too would not be spoken which not one of the faithful can doubt was spoken unto Christ. Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever, a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of Your kingdom. To him therefore also now it is said, O God, who shall be like You? For unto many You vouchsafed to be likened in Your humiliation, even so far as to the robbers that were crucified with You: but when in glory You shall come, who shall be like You?...

3. For lo Your enemies have sounded, and they that hate You have lifted up the head Psalm 82:2. He seems to me to signify the last days, when these things that are now repressed by fear are to break forth into free utterance, but quite irrational, so that it should rather be called a sound, than speech or discourse. They will not, therefore, then begin to hate, but they that hate You will then lift up the head. And not heads, but head; since they are to come even to that point, that they shall have that head, which is lifted up above all that is called God, and that is worshipped; 2 Thessalonians 2:4 so that in him especially is to be fulfilled, He that exalts himself shall be abased; Luke 14:11 and when He to whom it is said, Keep not silence, nor grow mild, O God, shall slay him with the breath of His mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming. 2 Thessalonians 2:8 Upon Your people they have malignantly taken counsel Psalm 82:3. Or, as other copies have it, They have cunningly devised counsel, and have devised against Your saints. In scorn this is said. For how should they be able to hurt the nation or people of God, or His saints, who know how to say, If God be for us, who shall be against us? Romans 8:31

4. They have said, Come, and let us destroy them from a nation Psalm 82:4. He has put the singular number for the plural: as it is said, Whose is this cattle, even though the question be of a flock, and the meaning these cattle. Lastly, other copies have from nations, where the translators have rather followed the sense than the word. Come, and let us destroy them from a nation. This is that sound whereby they sounded rather than spoke, since they did vainly make a noise with vain sayings. And let it not be mentioned of the name of Israel any more. This others have expressed more plainly, and let there not be remembrance of the name of Israel any more. Since, let it be mentioned of the name (*memoretur nominis*), is an unusual phrase in the Latin language; for it is rather customary to say, let the name be mentioned (*memoretur nomen*); but the sense is the same. For he who said, let it be mentioned of the name, translated the Greek phrase. But Israel must here be understood in fact of the seed of Abraham, to which the Apostle says, Therefore you are the seed of Abraham, according to the promise heirs. Galatians 3:29 Not Israel according to the flesh, of which he says, Behold Israel after the flesh.

5. Since they have imagined with one consent; together against You have they disposed a testament Psalm 82:5: as though they could be the stronger. In fact, a testament is a name given in the Scriptures not only to that which is of no avail till the death of the testators, but every covenant and decree they used to call a testament. For Laban and Jacob made a testament, Genesis 31:44 which was certainly to have force between the living; and such cases without number are read in the words of God. Then he begins to make mention of the enemies of Christ, under certain proper names of nations; the interpretation of which names sufficiently indicates what he would have to be understood. For by such names are most suitably figured the enemies of the truth. Idumæans, for instance, are interpreted either men of blood, or of earth. Ismaelites, are obedient to themselves, and therefore not to God, but to themselves. Moab, from the father; which in a bad sense has no better explanation, than by considering it so connected with the actual history, that Lot, a father, by the illicit intercourse procured by his daughter, begot him; since it was from that very circumstance he was so named. Genesis 19:36-37 Good, however, was his father, but as the Law is good if one use it lawfully, 1 Timothy 1:8 not impurely and unlawfully. Hagarens, proselytes, that is strangers, by which name also are signified, among the enemies of God's people, not those who become citizens, but those who persevere in a foreign and alien mind, and when an opportunity of doing harm occurs, show themselves. Gebal, a vain valley, that is, humble in pretence. Amon, an unquiet people, or a people of sadness. Amalech, a people licking; whence elsewhere it is said, and his enemies shall lick the earth. The alien race, though by their very name in Latin, they sufficiently show themselves to be aliens, and for this cause of course enemies, yet in the Hebrew are called Philistines, which is explained, falling from drink, as of persons made drunken by worldly luxury. Tyre in Hebrew is called Sor; which whether it

be interpreted straitness or tribulation, must be taken in the case of these enemies of God's people in that sense, of which the Apostle speaks, Tribulation and straitness on every soul of man that does evil. Romans 2:9 All these are thus enumerated in the Psalms: The tabernacles of the Edomites, Ishmaelites, Moab and the Hagarenes, Gebal, and Amon, and Amalech, and the Philistines with those who inhabit Tyre.

6. And as if to point out the cause why they are enemies of God's people, he adds, For Assur came with them. Now Assur is often used figuratively for the devil, who works in the children of disobedience, Ephesians 2:2 as in his own vessels, that they may assail the people of God. They have helped the children of Lot, he says: for all enemies, by the working in them of the devil, their prince, have helped the children of Lot, who is explained to mean one declining. But the apostate angels are well explained as the children of declension, for by declining from truth they swerved to become followers of the devil. These are they of whom the Apostle speaks: You wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, and the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Ephesians 6:12 Those invisible enemies are helped then by unbelieving men, in whom they work in order to assail the people of God.

7. Now let us see what the prophetic spirit prays may fall upon them, rather foretelling than cursing. Do thou to them, he says, as unto Madian and Sisera, as unto Jabin at the brook of Kishon Psalm 82:9. They perished at Endor, they became as the dung of the earth Psalm 82:10. All these, the history relates, were subdued and conquered by Israel, which then was the people of God: as was the case also with those whom he next mentions: Make their princes like Oreb and Zeb, and Zebec and Salmana Psalm 82:11. The meaning of these names is as follows: Madian is explained a perverted judgment: Sisera, shutting out of joy: Jabin, wise. Judges 4:7-8 But in these enemies conquered by God's people is to be understood that wise man of whom the Apostle speaks, Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? 1 Corinthians 1:20 Oreb is dryness, Zeb, wolf, Zebec, a victim, namely of the wolf; for he too has his victims; Salmana, shadow of commotion. All these agree to the evils which the people of God conquer by good. Moreover Kishon, the torrent in which they were conquered, is explained, their hardness. Endor, where they perished, is explained, the Fountain of generation, but of the carnal generation namely, to which they were given up, and therefore perished, not heeding the regeneration which leads unto life, where they shall neither marry nor be given in marriage, Luke 20:35 for they shall die no more. Rightly then it is said of these: they became as the dung of the earth, in that nothing was produced of them but fruitfulness of the earth. As then all these were in figure conquered by the people of God, as figures, so he prays that those other enemies may be conquered in truth.

8. All their princes, who said, Let us take to ourselves the sanctuary of God in possession Psalm 82:12. This is that vain noise, with which, as said above, Your enemies have made a murmuring. But what must be understood by the sanctuary of God, except the temple of God? As says the Apostle: For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. 1 Corinthians 3:17 For what else do the enemies aim at, but to take into possession, that is, to make subject to themselves the temple of God, that it may give in to their ungodly wills?

9. But what follows? My God, make them like a wheel Psalm 82:13. This is fitly taken as meaning that they should be constant in nothing that they think; but I think it may also be rightly explained, make them like a wheel, because a wheel is lifted up on the part of what is behind, is thrown down on the part of what is in front; and so it happens to all the enemies of the people of God. For this is not a wish, but a prophecy. He adds: as the stubble in the face of the wind. By face he means presence; for what face has the wind,

which has no bodily features, being only a motion, in that it is a kind of wave of air? But it is put for temptation, by which light and vain hearts are hurried away.

10. This levity, by which consent is easily given to what is evil, is followed by severe torment; therefore he proceeds:--

Like as the fire that burns up the wood, and as the flame that consumes the mountains Psalm 82:14: so shall You persecute them with Your tempest, and in Your anger shall disturb them Psalm 82:15. Wood, he says, for its barrenness, mountains for their loftiness; for such are the enemies of God's people, barren of righteousness, full of pride. When he says, fire and flame, he means to repeat under another term, the idea of God judging and punishing. But in saying, with Your tempest, he means, as he goes on to explain, Your anger: and the former expression, You shall persecute, answers to, You shall disturb. We must take care, however, to understand, that the anger of God is free from any turbulent emotion; for His anger is an expression for His just method of taking vengeance: as the law might be said to be angry when its ministers are moved to punish by its sanction.

11. Fill their faces with shame, and they shall seek Your name, O Lord Psalm 82:16. Good and desirable is this which he prophesies for them: and he would not prophesy thus, unless there were even in that company of the enemies of God's people, some men of such kind that this would be granted to them before the last judgment: for now they are mixed together, and this is the body of the enemies, in respect of the envy whereby they rival the people of God. And now, where they can, they make a noise and lift up their head: but severally, not universally as they will do at the end of the world, when the last judgment is about to fall. But it is the same body, even in those who out of this number shall believe and pass into another body (for the faces of these are filled with shame, that they may seek the name of the Lord), as well as in those others who persevere unto the end in the same wickedness, who are made as stubble before the wind, and are consumed like a wood and barren mountains. To these he again returns, saying, They shall blush and be vexed for ever and ever Psalm 82:17. For those are not vexed for ever and ever who seek the name of the Lord, but having respect unto the shame of their sins, they are vexed for this purpose, that they may seek the name of the Lord, through which they may be no more vexed.

12. Again, he returns to these last, who in the same company of enemies are to be made ashamed for this purpose, that they may not be ashamed for ever: and for this purpose to be destroyed in as far as they are wicked, that being made good they may be found alive for ever. For having said of them, Let them be ashamed and perish, he instantly adds, and let them know that Your name is the Lord, You are only the Most Highest in all the earth Psalm 82:18. Coming to this knowledge, let them be so confounded as to please God: let them so perish, as that they may abide. Let them know, he says, that Your name is the Lord: as if whoever else are called lords are named so not truly but by falsehood, for they rule but as servants, and compared with the true Lord are not lords; as it is said, I Am that I Am: Exodus 3:14 as if those things which are made are not, compared with Him by whom they are made. He adds, You only are the Most Highest in all the earth: or, as other copies have it, over all the earth; as it might be said, in all the heaven, or over all the heaven: but he used the latter word in preference, to depress the pride of earth. For earth ceases to be proud, that is, man ceases, to whom it was said, You are dust; Genesis 3:19 and why is earth and ashes proud? Sirach 10:9 when he says that the Lord is the Most Highest above all the earth, that is, that no man's thoughts avail against those who are called according to His purpose, and of whom it is said, If God is for us, who can be against us?

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