

# Exposition on Psalm 87

by St. Augustine

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*The sermon explores the city of God, its structure, and its inhabitants, highlighting the joy and rejoicing that will be experienced in the city.*

**Topics:** "Heavenly City", "Christ Foundation"

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## Description

St. Augustine preaches about the heavenly city, emphasizing that as Christians, we are citizens of a city where the Sovereign, Christ, has made a path for us to reach it. The foundations of this city are upon the holy hills, symbolizing the Apostles and Prophets, with Jesus Christ as the head cornerstone. Christ is both the earliest and highest foundation, and the Apostle Paul affirms that no other foundation can be laid except Christ Jesus. The Psalms speak of Rahab, Babylon, and other nations being included in the city of God, where very excellent things are said, and all who dwell there will be made joyous and will praise God forever.

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## Transcript

1. The Psalm which has just been sung is short, if we look to the number of its words, but of deep interest in its thoughts... The subject of song and praise in that Psalm is a city, whose citizens are we, as far as we are Christians: whence we are absent, as long as we are mortal: whither we are tending: through whose approaches, undiscoverable among the brakes and thorns that entangle them, the Sovereign of the city made Himself a path for us to reach it. Walking thus in Christ, and pilgrims till we arrive, and sighing as we long for a certain ineffable repose that dwells within that city, a repose of which it is promised, that the eye of man has never seen such, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into his heart to conceive; let us chant the song of a longing heart: for he who truly longs, thus sings within his soul, though his tongue be silent: he who does not, however he may resound in human ears, is voiceless to God. See what ardent lovers of that city were they by whom these words were composed, by whom they have been handed down to us; with how deep a feeling were they sung by those! A feeling that the love of that city created in them: that love the Spirit of God inspired; the love of God, he says, shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, which is given unto us. Fervent with this Spirit then, let us listen to what is said of that city.

2. Her foundations are upon the holy hills Psalm 86:1. The Psalm had as yet said nothing of the city: it begins thus, and says, Her foundations are upon the holy hills. Whose? There can be no doubt that foundations, especially among the hills, belong to some city. Thus filled with the Holy Spirit, and with many thoughts of love and longing for that city, as if after long internal meditation, that citizen bursts out, Her

foundations are upon the holy hills; as if he had already said something concerning it. And how could he have said nothing on a subject, respecting which in his heart he had never been silent? For how could her foundations have been written, of which nothing had been said before? But, as I said, after long and silent travelling in contemplation of that city in his mind, crying to God, he bursts out into the ears of men thus: Her foundations are upon the holy hills. And, supposing persons who heard to enquire of what city he spoke he adds, the Lord loves the gates of Sion. Behold, then, a city whose foundations are upon the holy hills, a city called Sion, whose gates the Lord loves, as he adds, above all the dwellings of Jacob. But what does this mean, her foundations on the holy hills? What are the holy hills upon which this city is built? Another citizen tells us this more explicitly, the Apostle Paul: of this was the Prophet a citizen, of this the Apostle citizen: and they spoke to exhort the other citizens. But how are these, I mean the Prophets and Apostles, citizens? Perhaps in this sense; that they are themselves the hills, upon which are the foundations of this city, whose gates the Lord loves. Let then another citizen state this clearly, that I may not seem to guess. Speaking to the Gentiles, and telling them how they were returning, and being, as it were, framed together into the holy structure, built, he says, upon the foundations of the Apostles and Prophets: and because neither the Apostles nor Prophets, upon whom the foundations of that city rest, could stand by their own power, he adds, Jesus Christ Himself being the head corner stone. Ephesians 2:20 That the Gentiles, therefore, might not think they had no relation to Sion: for Sion was a certain city of this world, which bore a typical resemblance as a shadow to that Sion of which he presently speaks, that Heavenly Jerusalem, of which the Apostle says, which is the mother of us all; Galatians 4:26 they might not be said to bear no relation to Sion, on the ground that they did not belong to the Jewish people, he addresses them thus: Now therefore you are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God, and are built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. Ephesians 2:19-20 You see the structure of so great a city: yet whereon does all that edifice repose, where does it rest, that it may never fall? Jesus Christ Himself, he says, being the head corner stone.

3. ...But that you may know that Christ is at once the earliest and the highest foundation, the Apostle says, Other foundation can no man lay than is laid, which is Christ Jesus. 1 Corinthians 3:11 How, then, are the Prophets and Apostles foundations, and yet Christ so, than whom nothing can be higher? How, think you, save that as He is openly styled, Saint of saints, so figuratively Foundation of foundations? Thus if you are thinking of mysteries, Christ is the Saint of saints: if of a subject flock, the Shepherd of shepherds: if of a structure, the Pillar of pillars.

In material edifices, the same stone cannot be above and below: if at the bottom, it cannot be at the top: and vice versa: for almost all bodies are liable to limitations in space: nor can they be everywhere or for ever; but as the Godhead is in every place, from every place symbols may be taken for It; and not being any of these things in external properties, It can be everything in figure. Is Christ a door, in the same sense as the doors we see made by carpenters? Surely not; and yet He said, I am the door.

Or a shepherd, in the same capacity as those who guard sheep? Though He said, I am the Shepherd. Both these names occur in the same passage: in the Gospel, He said, that the shepherd enters by the door: the words are, I am the good Shepherd; and in the same passage, I am the door: and who is the shepherd who enters by the door? I am the good Shepherd: and what is the door by which Thou, Good Shepherd, enterest? How then are You all things? In the sense in which everything is through Me.

To explain: when Paul enters by the door, does not Christ? Wherefore? Not because Paul is Christ: but since Christ is in Paul: and Paul acts through Christ. The Apostle says, Do ye seek a proof of Christ speaking in me? 2 Corinthians 13:3 When His saints and faithful disciples enter by the door, does not

Christ enter by the door? How are we to prove this? Since Saul, not yet called Paul, was persecuting those very saints, when He called to him from Heaven, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?

Acts 9:4 Himself then is the foundation, and corner stone: rising from the bottom: if indeed from the bottom: for the base of this foundation is the highest exaltation of the building: and as the support of bodily fabrics rests upon the ground, that of spiritual structures reposes on high. Were we building up ourselves upon the earth, we should lay our foundation on the lowest level: but since our edifice is a heavenly one, to Heaven our Foundation has gone before us: so that our Saviour, the corner stone, the Apostles, and mighty Prophets, the hills that bear the fabric of the city, constitute a sort of living structure.

This building now cries from your hearts; that you may be built up into its fabric, the hand of God, as of an artificer, works even through my tongue. Nor was it without a meaning that Noah's ark was made of square beams, which were typical of the form of the Church. For what is it to be made square? Listen to the resemblance of the squared stone: like qualities should the Christian have: for in all his trials he never falls: though pushed, and, as it were, turned over, he falls not: and thus too, whichever way a square stone is turned, it stands erect....In earthly cities, one thing is the structure of buildings: another thing are the citizens that dwell therein: that city is built of its own inmates, who are themselves the blocks that form the city, for the very stones are living: You also, says the Apostle, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, 1 Peter 2:5 words that are addressed to ourselves. Let us then pursue the contemplation of that city.

4. The Lord loves the gates of Sion more than all the dwellings of Jacob Psalm 86:2. I have made the foregoing remarks, that you may not imagine the gates are one thing, the foundations another. Why are the Apostles and Prophets foundations? Because their authority is the support of our weakness. Why are they gates? Because through them we enter the kingdom of God: for they proclaim it to us: and while we enter by their means, we enter also through Christ, Himself being the Gate. And twelve gates of Jerusalem are spoken of, Revelation 21:12 and the one gate is Christ, and the twelve gates are Christ for Christ dwells in the twelve gates, hence was twelve the number of the Apostles. There is a deep mystery in this number of twelve: You shall sit, says our Saviour, on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Matthew 19:28 If there are twelve thrones there, there will be no room for the judgment-seat of Paul, the thirteenth Apostle, though he says that he shall judge not men only, but even Angels; which, but the fallen Angels? Do you not know, that we shall judge Angels, 1 Corinthians 6:3 he writes. The world would answer, Why do you boast that you shall be a judge? Where will be your throne? Our Lord spoke of twelve thrones for the twelve Apostles: one, Judas, fell, and his place being supplied by Matthias, the number of twelve thrones was made up: Acts 1:15-26 first, then, discover room for your judgment-seat; then threaten that you will judge. Let us, therefore, reflect upon the meaning of the twelve thrones. The expression is typical of a sort of universality, as the Church was destined to prevail throughout the whole world: whence this edifice is styled a building together into Christ: and because judges come from all quarters, the twelve thrones are spoken of, just as the twelve gates, from the entering in from all sides into that city. Not only therefore have those twelve, and the Apostle Paul, a claim to the twelve thrones, but, from the universal signification, all who are to sit in judgment: in the same manner as all who enter the city, enter by one or the other of the twelve gates. There are four quarters of the globe: East, West, North, and South: and they are constantly alluded to in the Scriptures. From all those four winds; our Lord declares in the Gospel that He will call his sheep from the four winds; Mark 13:27 therefore from all those four winds is the Church called. And how called? On every side it is called in the Trinity: no otherwise is it called than by Baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: four then being thrice taken, twelve are found.

Knock, therefore, with all your hearts at these gates: and let Christ cry within you: Open me the gates of righteousness. For He went before us the Head: He follows Himself in His Body....

5. Very excellent things are said of you, thou city of God Psalm 86:3. He was, as it were, contemplating that city of Jerusalem on earth: for consider what city he alludes to, of which certain very excellent things are spoken. Now the earthly city has been destroyed: after suffering the enemy's rage, it fell to the earth; it is no longer what it was: it exhibited the emblem, and the shadow has passed away. Whence then are very excellent things spoken of you, thou city of God? Listen whence: I will think upon Rahab and Babylon, with them that know Me Psalm 86:4. In that city, the Prophet, in the person of God, says, I will think upon Rahab and Babylon. Rahab belongs not to the Jewish people; Babylon belongs not to the Jewish people; as is clear from the next verse: For the Philistines also, and Tyre, with the Ethiopians, were there. Deservedly then, very excellent things are spoken of you, thou city of God: for not only is the Jewish nation, born of the flesh of Abraham, included therein, but all nations also, some of which are named that all may be understood. I will think, he says, upon Rahab: who is that harlot? That harlot in Jericho, who received the spies and conducted them out of the city by a different road: who trusted beforehand in the promise, who feared God, who was told to hang out of the window a line of scarlet thread, that is, to bear upon her forehead the sign of the blood of Christ. She was saved there, and thus represented the Church of the Gentiles: whence our Lord said to the haughty Pharisees, Verily I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. Matthew 21:31 They go before, because they do violence: they push their way by faith, and to faith a way is made, nor can any resist, since they who are violent take it by force. For it is written, The kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. Matthew 11:12 Such was the conduct of the robber, more courageous on the cross than in the place of ambush. I will think upon Rahab and Babylon. By Babylon is meant the city of this world: as there is one holy city, Jerusalem; one unholy, Babylon: all the unholy belong to Babylon, even as all the holy to Jerusalem. But he slides from Babylon to Jerusalem. How, but by Him who justifies the ungodly: Jerusalem is the city of the saints; Babylon of the wicked: but He comes who justifies the ungodly: since it is said, I will think not only upon Rahab, but upon Babylon, but with whom? with them that know Me....

6. Listen now to a deep mystery. Rahab is there through Him, through whom also is Babylon, now no longer Babylon, but beginning to be Jerusalem. The daughter is divided against her mother, and will be among the members of that queen to whom is said, Forget your own people, and your father's house, so shall the king have pleasure in your beauty. For how could Babylon aspire to Jerusalem? How could Rahab reach those foundations? How could the Philistines, or Tyre, or the people of the Ethiopians? Listen to this verse, Sion, my mother, a man shall say. There is then a man who says this: through whom all those I have mentioned make their approach. Who is this man? It tells if we hear, if we understand. It follows, as if a question had been raised, through whose aid Rahab, Babylon, the Philistines, Tyre, and the Morians, gained an entrance. Behold, through whom they come; Sion, my mother, a man shall say; and a man was born in her, and Himself the Most High has founded her Psalm 86:5. What, my brethren, can be clearer? Truly, because very excellent things are spoken of you, thou city of God. Lo, Sion, O mother, a man shall say. What man? He who was born in her. It is then the man who was born in her, and He Himself has founded her. Yet how can He be born in the city which He Himself founded? It had already been founded, that therein He might be born. Understand it thus, if you can. Mother Sion, he shall say; but it is a man that shall say, Mother Sion; yea, a man was born in her: and yet he has founded her (not a man, but), the Most High. As He created a mother of whom He would be born, so He founded a city in which He would be born. What hope is ours, brethren! On our behalf the Most High, who founded the city, addresses that city as a mother: and He was born in her, and the Most High has founded her.

7. As though it were said, How do ye know this? All of us have sung these Psalms: and Christ, Man for our sake, God before us, sings within us all. But is this much to say, before us, of Him who was before heaven and earth and time? He then, born for our sakes a man, in that city, also founded her when He was the Most High. Yet how are we assured of this? The Lord shall rehearse it when He writes up the people Psalm 86:6, as the following verse has it. The Lord shall declare, when He writes up the people, and their princes. What princes? Those who were born in her; those princes who, born within her walls, became therein princes: for before they could become princes in her, God chose the despised things of the world to confound the strong. Was the fisherman, the publican, a prince? They were indeed princes: but because they became such in her. Princes of what kind were they? Princes come from Babylon, believing monarchs of this world, came to the city of Rome, as to the head of Babylon: they went not to the temple of the Emperor, but to the tomb of the Fisherman. Whence indeed did they rank as princes? God chose the weak things of the world to confound the strong, and the foolish things He has chosen, and things which are not as though they were, that things which are may be brought to nought. 1 Corinthians 1:26-27 This He does who from the ground raises the helpless, and from the dunghill exalts the poor. For what purpose? That He may set him with the princes, even with the princes of His people. This is a mighty deed, a deep source of pleasure and exultation. Orators came later into that city, but they could never have done so, had not fishermen preceded them. These things are glorious indeed, but where could they take place, but in that city of God, of whom very excellent things are spoken?

8. So thus, after drawing together and mingling every source of joyous exultation, how does he conclude? The dwelling as of all that shall be made joyous is in You Psalm 86:7. As if all made joyous, all rejoicing, shall dwell in that city. Amid our journeyings here we suffer bruises: our last home shall be the home of joy alone. Toil and groans shall perish: prayers pass away, hymns of praise succeed. There shall be the dwelling of the happy; no longer shall there be the groans of those that long, but the gladness of those who enjoy.

For He will be present for whom we sigh: we shall be like Him, as we shall see Him as He is: 1 John 3:2 there it will be our whole task to praise and enjoy the presence of God: and what beyond shall we ask for, when He alone satisfies us, by whom all things were made? We shall dwell and be dwelt in; and shall be subject to Him, that God may be all in all. 1 Corinthians 15:28 Blessed, then, are they that dwell in Your house. How blessed? Blessed in their gold, and silver, their numerous slaves, and multiplied offspring?

Blessed are they that dwell in Your house: for ever and ever they will be praising You. Blessed in that sole labour which is rest! Let this then be the one and only object of our desire, my brethren, when we shall have reached this pass. Let, us prepare ourselves to rejoice in God: to praise Him. The good works which conduct us there, will not be needed there. I described, as far as I could, only yesterday, our condition there: works of charity there will be none, where there will be no misery: you shall not find one in want, one naked, no one will meet you tormented with thirst, there will be no stranger, no sick to visit, no dead to bury, no disputants to set at peace.

What then will you find to do? Shall we plant new vines, plough, traffic, make voyages, to support the necessities of the body? Deep quiet shall be there; all toilsome work, that necessity demands, will cease: the necessity being dead, its works will perish too. What then will be our state? As far as possible, the tongue of a man thus told us. As it were, the dwelling of all who shall be made perfect is in You. Why does he say, as it were? Because there shall be such joy there as we know not here.

Many pleasures do I behold here, and many rejoice in this world, some in one thing, others in another; but there is nothing to compare with that delight, but it shall be as it were being made joyful. For if I say joyfulness, men at once think of such joyfulness as men use to have in wine, in feasting, in avarice, and in the world's distinctions. For men are elated by these things, and mad with a kind of joy: but there is no joy, says the Lord, unto the wicked. Isaiah 48:22 There is a sort of joyfulness which the ear of man has not heard, nor his eye seen, nor has it entered into his heart to conceive. 1 Corinthians 2:9 As it were, the dwelling of all who shall be made joyful is in You.

Let us prepare for other delights: for a kind of shadow is what we find here, not the reality: that we may not expect to enjoy such things there as here we delight in: otherwise our self-denial will be avarice. Some persons, when invited to a rich banquet, where there are many and costly dishes yet to come on, abstain from breaking their fast: if you ask the reason, they tell you that they are fasting: which is indeed a great work, a Christian work. Yet be not hasty in praising them: examine their motives: it is their belly, not religion, that they are consulting.

That their appetite may not be palled by ordinary dishes, they abstain till more delicate food is set before them. This fast then is for the gullet's sake. Fasting is undoubtedly important: it fights against the belly and the palate; but sometimes it fights for them. Thus, my brethren, if you imagine that we shall find any such pleasures in that country to which the heavenly trumpet urges us on, and on that account abstain from present enjoyments, that you may receive the like more plentifully there, you imitate those I have described, who fast only for greater feasting, and abstain only for greater indulgence.

Do not ye like this: prepare yourselves for a certain ineffable delight: cleanse your hearts from all earthly and secular affections. We shall see something, the sight of which will make us blessed: and that alone will suffice for us. What then? Shall we not eat? Yes: we shall eat: but that shall be our food, which will ever refresh, and never fail. In You is the dwelling of all who shall be, as it were, made joyful. He has already told us how we shall be made joyful. Blessed are they that dwell in your house: for ever and ever they will be praising You.

Let us praise the Lord as far as we are able, but with mingled lamentations: for while we praise we long for Him, and as yet have Him not. When we have, all our sorrows will be taken from us, and nothing will remain but praise, unmixed and everlasting. Now let us pray.

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