

Exposition on Psalm 88

by St. Augustine

Psalm 88 is a prophetic psalm that describes the Passion of Christ, His suffering and humanity, and His resurrection and glory.

Scripture: Psalm 87:4, Isaiah 53:4, Matthew 26:37, Matthew 27:33, Luke 23:34, John 1:47, Romans 6:9, Romans 8:3, 1 Corinthians 1:20, 1 Corinthians 13:3, Ephesians 5:8, 1 Peter 2:21, 1 John 3:16

Topics: "Christ's Suffering", "Passion Of Christ"

Description

St. Augustine delves into Psalm 87, exploring the prophetic nature of the Psalm in relation to the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. He highlights the importance of imitating Christ's sacrifice and the need for charity in our actions. The Psalm is interpreted to reflect the sorrows and pains experienced by Christ, emphasizing His humanity and willingness to endure suffering for the salvation of humanity. St. Augustine connects the Psalm to the concept of Christ being free among the dead, emphasizing His unique ability to lay down His life and take it up again. The Psalm is further analyzed to reveal the depth of Christ's suffering, the rejection He faced, and the ultimate victory over death and sin.

Transcript

1. The Title of this eighty-seventh Psalm contains a fresh subject for enquiry: the words occurring here, for Melech to respond, being nowhere else found. We have already given our opinion on the meaning of the titles Psalmus Cantici and Canticum Psalmi: and the words, sons of Core, are constantly repeated, and have often been explained: so also to the end; but what comes next in this title is peculiar. For Melech we may translate into Latin for the chorus, for chorus is the sense of the Hebrew word Melech.. ..The Passion of our Lord is here prophesied. Now the Apostle Peter says, Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow His steps; 1 Peter 2:21 this is the meaning of to respond. The Apostle John also says, As Christ laid down His life for us, so ought we also to lay down our lives for the brethren; 1 John 3:16 this also is to respond. But the choir signifies concord, which consists in charity: whoever therefore in imitation of our Lord's Passion gives up his body to be burnt, if he have not charity, does not answer in the choir, and therefore it profits him nothing. 1 Corinthians 13:3 Further, as in Latin the terms Precentor and Succentor are used to denote in music the performer who sings the first part, and him who takes it up; just so in this song of the Passion, Christ going before is followed by the choir of martyrs unto the end of gaining crowns in Heaven. This is sung by the sons of Core, that is, the imitators of Christ's Passion: as Christ was crucified in Calvary, which is the interpretation of the Hebrew word Core. Matthew 27:33 This also is the understanding of Æman the Israelite: words occurring at the end of this title. Æman

is said to mean, his brother: for Christ deigns to make those His brethren, who understand the mystery of His Cross, and not only are not ashamed of it, but faithfully glory in it, not praising themselves for their own merits, but grateful for His grace: so that it may be said to each of them, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile, John 1:47 just as holy Scripture says of Israel himself, that he was without guile. Genesis 25:27

2. O Lord God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before You Psalm 87:1. Let us therefore now hear the voice of Christ singing before us in prophecy, to whom His own choir should respond either in imitation, or in thanksgiving.

O let my prayer enter into Your presence, incline Your ear unto my calling Psalm 87:2. For even our Lord prayed, not in the form of God, but in the form of a servant; for in this He also suffered. He prayed both in prosperous times, that is, by day, and in calamity, which I imagine is meant by night. The entrance of prayer into God's presence is its acceptance: the inclination of His ear is His compassionate listening to it: for God has not such bodily members as we have. The passage is however, as usual, a repetition. 3.

For my soul is filled with evils, and my life draws near unto hell Psalm 87:3. Dare we speak of the Soul of Christ as filled with evils, when the passion had strength as far as it had any, only over the body?...The soul therefore may feel pain without the body: but without the soul the body cannot. Why therefore should we not say that the Soul of Christ was full of the evils of humanity, though not of human sins? Another Prophet says of Him, that He grieved for us: Isaiah 53:4 and the Evangelist says, And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy: and our Lord Himself says unto them of Himself, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.

Matthew 26:37-38 The Prophet who composed this Psalm, foreseeing that this would happen, introduces Him saying, My soul is full of evils, and My life draws near unto hell. For the very same sense is here expressed in other words, as when He said, My soul is sorrowful, even unto death. The words, My soul is sorrowful, are like these, My soul is full of evils: and what follows, even unto death, like, my life draws near unto hell. These feelings of human infirmity our Lord took upon Him, as He did the flesh of human infirmity, and the death of human flesh, not by the necessity of His condition, but by the free will of His mercy, that He might transfigure into Himself His own body, which is the Church (the head of which He deigned to be), that is, His members in His holy and faithful disciples: that if amid human temptations any one among them happened to be in sorrow and pain, he might not therefore think that he was separated from His favour: that the body, like the chorus following its leader, might learn from its Head, that these sorrows were not sin, but proofs of human weakness.

We read of the Apostle Paul, a chief member in this body, and we hear him confessing that his soul was full of such evils, when he says, that he feels great heaviness and continual sorrow in heart for his brethren according to the flesh, who are Israelites. And if we say that our Lord was sorrowful for them also at the approach of His Passion, in which they would incur the most atrocious guilt, I think we shall not speak amiss. Lastly, the very thing said by our Saviour on the Cross, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do, Luke 23:34 is expressed in this Psalm below, I am counted as one of them that go down into the pit Psalm 87:4: by them who knew not what they were doing, when they imagined that He died like other men, subjected to necessity, and overcome by it. The word pit is used for the depth of woe or of Hell. I have been as a man that has no help.

4. Free among the dead Psalm 87:5. In these words our Lord's Person is most clearly shown: for who else is free among the dead but He who though in the likeness of sinful flesh is alone among sinners without sin? Romans 8:3 ...He therefore, free among the dead, who had it in His power to lay down His life, and again to take it; from whom no one could take it, but He laid it down of His own free will; who could revive His own flesh, as a temple destroyed by them, at His will; who, when all had forsaken Him on the eve of His Passion, remained not alone, because, as He testifies, His Father forsook Him not; John 8:29 was nevertheless by His enemies, for whom He prayed, who knew not what they did, ...counted as one who has no help; like them that are wounded, and lie in the grave.

But he adds, Whom thou dost not yet remember: and in these words there is to be remarked a distinction between Christ and the rest of the dead. For though He was wounded, and when dead laid in the tomb, Matthew 27:50, 60 yet they who knew not what they were doing, or who He was, regarded Him as like others who had perished from their wounds, and who slept in the tomb, who are as yet out of remembrance of God, that is, whose hour of resurrection has not yet arrived. For thus the Scripture speaks of the dead as sleeping, because it wishes them to be regarded as destined to awake, that is, to rise again.

But He, wounded and asleep in the tomb, awoke on the third day, and became like a sparrow that sits alone on the housetop, that is, on the right hand of His Father in Heaven: and now dies no more, death shall no more have dominion over Him. Romans 6:9 Hence He differs widely from those whom God has not yet remembered to cause their resurrection after this manner: for what was to go before in the Head, was kept for the Body in the end. God is then said to remember, when He does an act: then to forget, when He does it not: for neither can God forget, as He never changes, nor remember, as He can never forget.

I am counted then, by those who know not what they do, as a man that has no help: while I am free among the dead, I am held by these men like them that are wounded, and lie in the grave. Yet those very men, who account thus of Me, are further said to be cut away from Your hand, that is, when I was made so by them, they were cut away from Your hand; they who believed Me destitute of help, are deprived of the help of Your hand: for they, as he says in another Psalm, have dug a pit before me, and are fallen into the midst of it themselves.

I prefer this interpretation to that which refers the words, they are cut away from Your hand, to those who sleep in the tomb, whom God has not yet remembered: since the righteous are among the latter, of whom, even though God has not yet called them to the resurrection, it is said, that their souls are in the hands of God, Wisdom 3:1 that is, that they dwell under the defence of the Most High; and shall abide under the shadow of the God of Heaven. But it is those who are cut away from the hand of God, who believed that Christ was cut off from His hand, and thus accounting Him among the wicked, dared to slay Him.

5. They laid Me in the lowest pit Psalm 87:6, that is, the deepest pit. For so it is in the Greek. But what is the lowest pit, but the deepest woe, than which there is none more deep? Whence in another Psalm it is said, You brought me out also of the pit of misery. In a place of darkness, and in the shadow of death, while they knew not what they did, they laid Him there, thus deeming of Him; they knew not Him whom none of the princes of this world knew. 1 Corinthians 2:8 By the shadow of death, I know not whether the death of the body is to be understood, or that of which it is written, That they walked in darkness and in the land of the shadow of death, a light is risen on them, Isaiah 9:2 because by belief they were brought from out of the darkness and death of sin into light and life. Such an one those who knew not what they did

thought our Lord, and in their ignorance accounted Him among those whom He came to help, that they might not be such themselves.

6. Your indignation lies hard upon Me Psalm 87:7, or, as other copies have it, Your anger; or, as others, Your fury: the Greek word θυμ^{ος} having undergone different interpretations. For where the Greek copies have ῥ^{ος}, no translator hesitated to express it by the Latin ira; but where the word is θυμ^{ος}, most object to rendering it by ira, although many of the authors of the best Latin style, in their translations from Greek philosophy, have thus rendered the word in Latin. But I shall not discuss this matter further: only if I also were to suggest another term, I should think indignation more tolerable than fury, this word in Latin not being applied to persons in their senses. What then does this mean, Your indignation lies hard upon Me, except the belief of those, who knew not the Lord of Glory? 1 Corinthians 2:8 who imagined that the anger of God was not merely roused, but lay hard upon Him, whom they dared to bring to death, and not only death, but that kind, which they regarded as the most execrable of all, namely, the death of the Cross: whence says the Apostle, Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangs upon a tree. Galatians 3:13 On this account, wishing to praise His obedience which He carried to the extreme of humility, he says, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death; and as this seemed little, he added, even the death of the Cross; Philipians 2:8 and with the same view as far as I can see, he says in this Psalm, And all your suspensions, or, as some translate waves, others tossings, You have brought over Me. We also find in another Psalm, All your suspensions and waves have come in upon Me, or, as some have translated better, have passed over Me: for it is δι^ελ^θον in Greek, not ἐ^σλ^θον: and where both expressions are employed, waves and suspensions, one cannot be used as equivalent to the other. In that passage we explained suspensions as threatenings, waves as the actual sufferings: both inflicted by God's judgment: but in that place it is said, All have passed over Me, here, You have brought all upon Me. In the other case, that is, although some evils took place, yet, he said, all those which are here mentioned passed over; but in this case, You have brought them upon Me. Evils pass over when they do not touch a man, as things which hang over him, or when they do touch him, as waves. But when he uses the word suspensions, he does not say they passed over, but, You have brought them upon Me, meaning that all which impended had come to pass. All things which were predicted of His Passion impended, as long as they remained in the prophecies for future fulfilment.

7. You have put Mine acquaintance far from Me Psalm 87:8. If we understand by acquaintance those whom He knew, it will be all men; for whom knew He not? But He calls those acquaintance, to whom He was Himself known, as far as they could know Him at that season: at least so far forth as they knew Him to be innocent, although they considered Him only as a man, not as likewise God. Although He might call the righteous whom He approved, acquaintance, as He calls the wicked unknown, to whom He was to say at the end, I know you not. Matthew 7:23 In what follows, and they have set Me for an abhorrence to themselves; those whom He called before acquaintance, may be meant, as even they felt horror at the mode of that death: but it is better referred to those of whom He was speaking above as His persecutors. I was delivered up, and did not get forth. Is this because His disciples were without, while He was being tried within? Matthew 26:56 Or are we to give a deeper meaning to the words, I cannot get forth as signifying, I remained hidden in My secret counsels, I showed not who I was, I did not reveal Myself, was not made manifest? And so it follows--

My eyes became weak from want Psalm 87:9. For what eyes are we to understand? If the eyes of the flesh in which He suffered, we do not read that His eyes became weak from want, that is, from hunger, in

His Passion, as is often the case; as He was betrayed after His Supper, and crucified on the same day: if the inner eyes, how were they weakened from want, in which there was a light that could never fail? But He meant by His eyes those members in the body, of which He was Himself the head, which, as brighter and more eminent and chief above the rest, He loved. It was of this body that the Apostle was speaking, when he wrote, taking his metaphor from our own body, If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? etc. 1 Corinthians 12:17-21 What he wished understood by these words, he has expressed more clearly, by adding, Now you are the body of Christ, and members in particular. 1 Corinthians 12:27 Wherefore as those eyes, that is, the holy Apostles, to whom not flesh and blood, but the Father which is in Heaven had revealed Him, so that Peter said, You are Christ, the Son of the Living God, Matthew 16:16 when they saw Him betrayed, and suffering such evils, saw Him not such as they wished, as He did not come forth, did not manifest Himself in His virtue and power, but still hidden in His secrecy, endured everything as a man overcome and enfeebled, they became weak for want, as if their food, their Light, had been withdrawn from them.

8. He continues, And I have called upon You. This indeed He did most clearly, when upon the Cross. But what follows? All the day I have stretched forth My hands unto You, must be examined how it must be taken. For if in this expression we understand the tree of the Cross, how can we reconcile it with the whole day? Can He be said to have hung upon the Cross during the whole day, as the night is considered a part of the day? But if day, as opposed to night, was meant by this expression, even of this day, the first and no small portion had passed by at the time of His crucifixion. But if we take day in the same sense of time (especially as the word is used in the feminine, a gender which is restricted to that sense in Latin, although not so in Greek, as it is always used in the feminine, which I suppose to be the reason for its translation in the same gender in our own version), the knot of the question will be drawn tighter: for how can it mean for the whole space of time, if He did not even for one day stretch forth His hands on the Cross? Further, should we take the whole for a part, as Scripture sometimes uses this expression, I do not remember an instance in which the whole is taken for a part, when the word whole is expressly added. For in the passage of the Gospel where the Lord says, The Son of Man shall be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, Matthew 12:40 it is no extraordinary licence to take the whole for the part, the expression not being for three whole days and three whole nights: since the one intermediate day was a whole one, the other two were parts, the last being part of the first day, the first part of the last. But if the Cross is not meant here, but the prayer, which we find in the Gospel that He poured forth in the form of a servant to God the Father, where He is said to have prayed long before His Passion, and on the eve of His Passion, and also when on the Cross, we do not read anywhere that He did so throughout the whole day. Therefore by the stretched-out hands throughout the whole day, we may understand the continuation of good works in which He never ceased from exertion.

9. But as His good works profited only the predestined to eternal salvation, and not all men, nor even all those among whom they were done, he adds, Do you show wonders among the dead? Psalm 87:10. If we suppose this relates to those whose flesh life has left, great wonders have been wrought among the dead, inasmuch as some of them have revived: Matthew 27:52 and in our Lord's descent into Hell, and His ascent as the conqueror of death, a great wonder was wrought among the dead.

He refers then in these words, Do You show wonders among the dead? to men so dead in heart, that such great works of Christ could not rouse them to the life of faith: for he does not say that wonders are not shown to them because they see them not, but because they do not profit them. For, as he says in this passage, the whole day have I stretched forth My hands to You: because He ever refers all His works to

the will of His Father, constantly declaring that He came to fulfil His Father's will: John 6:38 so also, as an unbelieving people saw the same works, another Prophet says, I have spread out my hands all day unto a rebellious people, that believes not, but contradicts.

Isaiah 65:2 Those then are dead, to whom wonders have not been shown, not because they saw them not, but since they lived not again through them. The following verse, Shall physicians revive them, and shall they praise You? means, that the dead shall not be revived by such means, that they may praise You. In the Hebrew there is said to be a different expression: giants being used where physicians are here: but the Septuagint translators, whose authority is such that they may deservedly be said to have interpreted by the inspiration of the Spirit of God owing to their wonderful agreement, conclude, not by mistake, but taking occasion from the resemblance in sound between the Hebrew words expressing these two senses, that the use of the word is an indication of the sense in which the word giants is meant to be taken.

For if you suppose the proud meant by giants, of whom the Apostle says, Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? 1 Corinthians 1:20 there is no incongruity in calling them physicians, as if by their own unaided skill they promised the salvation of souls: against whom it is said, Of the Lord is safety. But if we take the word giant in a good sense, as it is said of our Lord, He rejoices as a giant to run his course; that is Giant of giants, chief among the greatest and strongest, who in His Church excel in spiritual strength.

Just as He is the Mountain of mountains; as it is written, And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be manifested in the top of the mountains: Isaiah 2:2 and the Saint of saints: there is no absurdity in styling these same great and mighty men physicians. Whence says the Apostle, if by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them. Romans 11:14 But even such physicians, even though they cure not by their own power (as not even of their own do those of the body), yet so far forth as by faithful ministry they assist towards salvation, can cure the living, but not raise the dead: of whom it is said, Do You show wonders among the dead?

For the grace of God, by which men's minds in a certain manner are brought to live a fresh life, so as to be able to hear the lessons of salvation from any of its ministers whatever, is most hidden and mysterious. This grace is thus spoken of in the Gospel. No man can come to Me, except the Father which has sent Me draw him; John 6:44 ...in order to show, that the very faith by which the soul believes, and springs into fresh life from the death of its former affections, is given us by God.

Whatever exertions, then, the best preachers of the word, and persuaders of the truth through miracles, may make with men, just like great physicians: yet if they are dead, and through Your grace have not a second life, Do You show wonders among the dead, or shall physicians raise them? And shall they whom they raise praise You? For this confession declares that they live: not, as it is written elsewhere, Thanksgiving perishes from the dead, as from one that is not. Sirach 17:26

10. Shall one show Your loving-kindness in the grave, or Your faithfulness in destruction? Psalm 87:11. The word show is of course understood as if repeated, Shall any show Your faithfulness in destruction? Scripture loves to connect loving-kindness and faithfulness, especially in the Psalms. Destruction also is a repetition of the grave, and signifies them who are in the grave, styled above the dead, in the verse, Do you show wonders among the dead? for the body is the grave of the dead soul; whence our Lord's words in the Gospel, You are like whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but within are full of

dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Matthew 23:27-28

11. Shall your wondrous works be known in the dark, and your righteousness in the land where all things are forgotten? Psalm 87:12, the dark answers to the land of forgetfulness: for the unbelieving are meant by the dark, as the Apostle says, For you were sometimes darkness; Ephesians 5:8 and the land where all things are forgotten, is the man who has forgotten God; for the unbelieving soul can arrive at darkness so intense, that the fool says in his heart, There is no God. Thus the meaning of the whole passage may thus be drawn out in its connection: Lord, I have called upon You, amid My sufferings; all day I have stretched forth my hands unto You Psalm 87:13. I have never ceased to stretch forth My works to glorify You. Why then do the wicked rage against Me, unless because Thou showest not wonders among the dead? Because those wonders move them not to faith, nor can physicians restore them to life that they may praise You, because Your hidden grace works not in them to draw them unto believing: because no man comes unto Me, but whom You have drawn. Shall then Your loving-kindness be showed in the grave? That is, the grave of the dead soul, which lies dead beneath the body's weight: or Your faithfulness in destruction? That is, in such a death as cannot believe or feel any of these things. For how then in the darkness of this death, that is, in the man who in forgetting You has lost the light of his life, shall Your wondrous works and Your righteousness be known....

12. But that those prayers, the blessings of which surpass all words, may be more fervent and more constant, the gift that shall last unto eternity is deferred, while transitory evils are allowed to thicken. And so it follows: Lord, why have You cast off my prayer? Psalm 87:14, which may be compared with another Psalm: My God, My God, look upon me; why have You forsaken me? The reason is made matter of question, not as if the wisdom of God were blamed as doing so without a cause; and so here. Lord, why have You cast off my prayer? But if this cause be attended to carefully, it will be found indicated above; for it is with the view that the prayers of the Saints are, as it were, repelled by the delay of so great a blessing, and by the adversity they encounter in the troubles of life, that the flame, thus fanned, may burst into a brighter blaze.

13. For this purpose he briefly sketches in what follows the troubles of Christ's body. For it is not in the Head alone that they took place, since it is said to Saul too, Why do you persecute Me? Acts 9:4 and Paul himself, as if placed as an elect member in the same body, says, That I may fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh. Colossians 1:24 Why then, Lord, have You cast off my soul? Why hidest Thou Your face from me?

I am poor, and in toils from my youth up: and when lifted up, I was thrown down, and troubled Psalm 87:15.

Your wraths went over me: Your terrors disturbed me Psalm 87:16.

They came round about me all day like water: they compassed me about together Psalm 87:17.

A friend You have put far from me: and mine acquaintance from my misery Psalm 87:18. All these evils have taken place, and are happening in the limbs of Christ's body, and God turns away His face from their prayers, by not hearing as to what they wish for, since they know not that the fulfilment of their wishes would not be good for them. The Church is poor, as she hungers and thirsts in her wanderings for that food with which she shall be filled in her own country: she is in toils from her youth up, as the very Body of Christ says in another Psalm, Many a time have they overcome me from my youth. And for this reason

some of her members are lifted up even in this world, that in them may be the greater lowliness. Over that Body, which constitutes the unity of the Saints and the faithful, whose Head is Christ, go the wraths of God: yet abide not: since it is of the unbelieving only that it is written, that the wrath of God abides upon him. John 3:36 The terrors of God disturb the weakness of the faithful, because all that can happen, even though it actually happen not, it is prudent to fear; and sometimes these terrors so agitate the reflecting soul with the evils impending around, that they seem to flow around us on every side like water, and to encircle us in our fears. And as the Church while on pilgrimage is never free from these evils, happening as they do at one moment in one of her limbs, at another in another, he adds, all day, signifying the continuation in time, to the end of this world. Often too, friends and acquaintances, their worldly interests at stake, in their terror forsake the Saints; of which says the Apostle, all men forsook me: may it not be laid to their charge. 2 Timothy 4:16 But to what purpose is all this, but that early in the morning, that is, after the night of unbelief, the prayers of this holy Body may in the light of faith prevent God, until the coming of that salvation, which we are at present saved by hoping for, not by having, while we await it with patience and faithfulness. Then the Lord will not repel our prayers, as there will no longer be anything to be sought for, but everything that has been rightly asked, will be obtained: nor will He turn His face away from us, since we shall see Him as He is: 1 John 3:2 nor shall we be poor, because God will be our abundance, all in all: 1 Corinthians 15:28 nor shall we suffer, as there will be no more weakness: nor after exaltation shall we meet with humiliation and confusion, as there will be no adversity there: nor bear even the transient wrath of God, as we shall abide in His abiding love: nor will His terrors agitate us, because His promises realized will bless us: nor will our friend and acquaintance, being terrified, be far from us, where there will be no foe to dread.

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