

Exposition on Psalm 90

by St. Augustine

St. Augustine's exposition on Psalm 90 highlights God's eternal nature as our refuge and the fleeting nature of human life, urging believers to seek divine mercy through prayer and faith.

Scripture: Psalm 89:1-2, Psalm 89:7-17, Isaiah 40:6, John 5:46, 1 Corinthians 10:11

Topics: "Eternal Refuge", "Godly Discipline"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on Psalm 89, reflecting on Moses as the man of God who received the law and led the people through the wilderness. He delves into the eternal nature of God as our refuge, emphasizing the importance of turning to Him for strength and guidance. Augustine explores the fleeting nature of human life, the consequences of sin, and the need for God's mercy and discipline. He highlights the contrast between temporal and eternal blessings, urging believers to seek the latter. The sermon concludes with a call to focus on the one work of love, aligning all actions with faith and charity.

Transcript

1. This Psalm is entitled, The prayer of Moses the man of God, through whom, His man, God gave the law to His people, through whom He freed them from the house of slavery, and led them forty years through the wilderness. Moses was therefore the Minister of the Old, and the Prophet of the New Testament. For all these things, says the Apostle, happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, unto whom the ends of the world come. 1 Corinthians 10:11 In accordance therefore with this dispensation which was vouchsafed to Moses, this Psalm is to be examined, as it has received its title from his prayer

2. Lord, he says, You have been our refuge from one generation to another Psalm 89:1: either in every generation, or in two generations, the old and new: because, as I said, he was the Minister of the Testament that related to the old generation, and the Prophet of the Testament which appertained to the new. Jesus Himself, the Surety of that covenant, and the Bridegroom in the marriage which He entered into in that generation, says, Had ye believed Moses, you would have believed Me: for he wrote of Me. John 5:46 Now it is not to be believed that this Psalm was entirely the composition of that Moses, as it is not distinguished by any of those of his expressions which are used in his songs: but the name of the great servant of God is used for the sake of some intimation, which should direct the attention of the reader or listener. Lord, he says, You have been our refuge from one generation to the other.

3. He adds, how He became our refuge, since He began to be that, viz. a refuge, to us which He had not been before, not that He had not existed before He became our refuge: Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made: and from age even unto age You are Psalm 89:2. Thou therefore who art for ever, and before we were, and before the world was, hast become our refuge ever since we turned to You. But the expression, before the mountains, etc., seems to me to contain a particular meaning; for mountains are the higher parts of the earth, and if God was before even the earth were formed (or, as some books have it, from the same Greek word, framed), since it was by Him that it was formed, what is the need of saying that He was before the mountains, or any certain parts of it, since God was not only before the earth, but before heaven and earth, and even the whole bodily and spiritual creation? But it may certainly be that the whole rational creation is marked by this distinction; that while the loftiness of Angels is signified by the mountains, the lowliness of man is meant by the earth. And for this reason, although all the works of creation are not improperly said to be either made or formed; nevertheless, if there is any propriety in these words, the Angels are made; for as they are enumerated among His heavenly works, the enumeration itself is thus concluded: He spoke the word, and they were made; He commanded, and they were created; but the earth was formed, that man might thence be created in the body. For the Scripture uses this word, where we read, God made, or God formed man out of the dust of the ground. Genesis 2:7 Before then the noblest parts of the creation (for what is higher than the rational part of the Heavenly creation) were made: before the earth was made, that You might have worshippers upon the earth; and even this is little, as all these had a beginning either in or with time; but from age to age You are. It would have been better, from everlasting to everlasting: for God, who is before the ages, exists not from a certain age, nor to a certain age, which has an end, since He is without end. But it often happens in the Scripture, that the equivocal Greek word causes the Latin translator to put age for eternity and eternity for age. But he very rightly does not say, You were from ages, and unto ages You shall be: but puts the verb in the present, intimating that the substance of God is altogether immutable. It is not, He was, and Shall be, but only Is. Whence the expression, I Am that I Am; and, I Am has sent me unto you; Exodus 3:14 and, You shall change them, and they shall be changed: but You are the same, and Your years shall not fail. Behold then the eternity that is our refuge, that we may fly there from the mutability of time, there to remain for evermore.

4. But as our life here is exposed to numerous and great temptations, and it is to be feared lest we may be turned aside by them from that refuge, let us see what in consequence of this the prayer of the man of God seeks for. Turn not Thou man to lowness Psalm 89:3: that is, let not man, turned aside from Your eternal and sublime things, lust for things of time, savour of earthly things. This prayer is what God has Himself enjoined us, in the Prayer, Lead us not into temptation, Matthew 6:13 He adds, Again You say, Come again, you children of men. As if he said, I ask of You what You have commanded me to ask: giving glory to His grace, that he that glories, in the Lord he may glory: 1 Corinthians 1:31 without whose help we cannot by an exertion of our own will overcome the temptations of this life. Turn not Thou man to lowness: again you say, Turn again, you children of men. But grant what You have enjoined, by hearing the prayer of him who can at least pray, and aiding the faith of the willing soul.

5. For a thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday, which is past by Psalm 89:4: hence we ought to turn to Your refuge, where You are without any change, from the fleeting scenes around us; since however long a time may be wished for for this life, a thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday: not as tomorrow, which is to come: for all limited periods of time are reckoned as having already passed. Hence the Apostle's choice is rather to aim at what is before, Philippians 3:13 that is, to desire things eternal, and to forget things behind, by which temporal matters should be understood. But that no one may

imagine a thousand years are reckoned by God as one day, as if with God days were so long, when this is only said in contempt of the extent of time: he adds, and as a watch in the night: which only lasts three hours. Nevertheless men have ventured to assert their knowledge of times, to the pretenders to which our Lord said, It is not for you to know the times or seasons, which the Father has put in His own power: Acts 1:7 and they allege that this period may be defined six thousand years, as of six days. Nor have they heeded the words, are but as one day which is past by: for, when this was uttered, not a thousand years only had passed, and the expression, as a watch in the night, ought to have warned them that they might not be deceived by the uncertainty of the seasons: for even if the six first days in which God finished His works seemed to give some plausibility to their opinion, six watches, which amount to eighteen hours, will not consist with that opinion.

6. Next, the man of God, or rather the Prophetic spirit, seems to be reciting some law written in the secret wisdom of God, in which He has fixed a limit to the sinful life of mortals, and determined the troubles of mortality, in the following words: Their years are as things which are nothing worth: in the morning let it fade away like the grass Psalm 89:5. The happiness therefore of the heirs of the old covenant, which they asked of the Lord their God as a great boon, attained to receive this Law in His mysterious Providence. Moses seems to be reciting it: Their years shall be things which are esteemed as nothing. Such are those things which are not before they have come: and when come, shall soon not be: for they do not come to be here, but to be gone. In the morning, that is, before they come, as a heat let it pass by; but in the evening, it means after they come, let it fall, and be dried up, and withered Psalm 89:6. It is to fall in death, be dried up in the corpse, withered in the dust. What is this but flesh, wherein is the accursed lust of fleshly things? For all flesh is grass, and all the goodness of man as the flower of the field; the grass withers, the flower fades: but the word of the Lord abides for ever. Isaiah 40:6, 8

7. Making no secret that this fate is a penalty inflicted for sin, he adds at once, For we consume away in Your displeasure, and are troubled at Your wrathful indignation Psalm 89:7: we consume away in our weakness, and are troubled from the fear of death; for we have become weak, and yet fearful to end that weakness. Another, says He, shall gird you, and carry you whither you would not: John 21:18 although not to be punished, but to be crowned, by martyrdom; and the soul of our Lord, transforming us into Himself, was sorrowful even unto death: for the Lord's going out is no other than in death.

8. You have set our misdeeds before You Psalm 89:8: that is, You have not dissembled Your anger: and our age in the light of Your countenance. The light of Your countenance answers to before You, and to our misdeeds, as above.

9. For all our days are failed, and in Your anger we have failed Psalm 89:9. These words sufficiently prove that our subjection to death is a punishment. He speaks of our days failing, either because men fail in them from loving things that pass away, or because they are reduced to so small a number; which he asserts in the following lines: our years are spent in thought like a spider. The days of our age are threescore years and ten; and though men be so strong that they come to fourscore years, yet is more of them but labour and sorrow Psalm 89:10. These words appear to express the shortness and misery of this life: since those who have reached their seventieth year are styled old men. Up to eighty, however, they appear to have some strength; but if they live beyond this, their existence is laborious through multiplied sorrows. Yet many even below the age of seventy experience an old age the most infirm and wretched: and old men have often been found to be wonderfully vigorous even beyond eighty years. It is therefore better to search for some spiritual meaning in these numbers. For the anger of God is not greater on the sins of Adam (through whom alone sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed

upon all men), Romans 5:12 because they live a much shorter time than the men of old; since even the length of their days is ridiculed in the comparison of a thousand years to yesterday that is past, and to three hours: especially since at the very time when they provoked the anger of God to send the deluge in which they perished, their life was at its longest span.

10. Moreover, seventy and eighty years equal a hundred and fifty; a number which the Psalms clearly insinuate to be a sacred one. One hundred and fifty have the same relative signification as fifteen, the latter number being composed of seven and eight together: the first of which points to the Old Testament through the observation of the Sabbath; the latter to the New, referring to the resurrection of our Lord. Hence the fifteen steps in the Temple. Hence in the Psalms, fifteen songs of degrees. Hence the waters of the deluge overtopped the highest mountains by fifteen cubits: Genesis 7:20 and many other instances of the same nature. Our years are passed in thought like a spider. We were labouring in things corruptible, corruptible works were we weaving together: which, as the Prophet Isaiah says, by no means covered us. Isaiah 59:6 The days of our years are in themselves, etc. A distinction is here made between themselves and their strength: in themselves, that is, in the years or days themselves, may mean in temporal things, which are promised in the Old Testament, signified by the number seventy; but if not in themselves, but in their strength, refers not to temporal things, but to things eternal, fourscore years, as the New Testament contains the hope of a new life and resurrection for evermore: and what is added, that if they pass this latter period, their strength is labour and sorrow, intimates that such shall be the fate of him who goes beyond this faith, and seeks for more. It may also be understood thus: because although we are established in the New Testament, which the number eighty signifies, yet still our life is one of labour and sorrow, while we groan within ourselves, awaiting the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body; for we are saved by hope; and if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. Romans 8:23-25 This relates to the mercy of God, of which he proceeds to say, Since your mercy comes over us, and we shall be chastened: for the Lord chastens whom He loves, and scourges every son whom He receives, Hebrews 12:6 and to some mighty ones He gives a thorn in the flesh, to buffet them, that they may not be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, so that strength be made perfect in weakness. 2 Corinthians 12:7, 9 Some copies read, we shall be taught, instead of chastened, which is equally expressive of the Divine Mercy; for no man can be taught without labour and sorrow; since strength is made perfect in weakness.

11. For who knows the power of Your wrath: and for the fear of You to number Your anger? Psalm 89:11. It belongs to very few men, he says, to know the power of Your wrath; for when Thou dost spare, Your anger is so far heavier against most men; that we may know that labour and sorrow belong not to wrath, but rather to Your mercy, when You chasten and teacheest those whom You love, to save them from the torments of eternal punishment: as it is said in another Psalm, The sinner has provoked the Lord: He will not require it of him according to the greatness of His wrath. With this also is understood, Who knows? Such is the difficulty of finding any one who knows how to number Your anger by Your fear, that he adds this, meaning that it is to the purpose that Thou appearest to spare some, with whom You are more angry, that the sinner may be prospered in his path, and receive a heavier doom at the last. For when the power of human wrath has killed the body, it has nothing more to do: but God has power both to punish here, and after the death of the body to send into Hell, and by the few who are thus taught, the vain and seductive prosperity of the wicked is judged to be greater wrath of God.. ..

12. Make Your right hand so well known Psalm 89:12. This is the reading of most of the Greek copies: not of some in Latin, which is thus, Make Your right hand well known to me. What is, Your right hand, but Your

Christ, of whom it is said, And to whom is the Arm of the Lord revealed? Isaiah 53:1 Make Him so well known, that Your faithful may learn in Him to ask and to hope for those things rather of You as rewards of their faith, which do not appear in the Old Testament, but are revealed in the New: that they may not imagine that the happiness derived from earthly and temporal blessings is to be highly esteemed, desired, or loved, and thus their feet slip, when they see it in men who honour You not: that their steps may not give way, while they know not how to number Your anger. Finally, in accordance with this prayer of the Man that is His, He has made His Christ so well known as to show by His sufferings that not these rewards which seem so highly prized in the Old Testament, where they are shadows of things to come, but things eternal, are to be desired. The right hand of God may also be understood in this sense, as that by which He will separate His saints from the wicked: because that hand becomes well known, when it scourges every son whom He receives, and suffers him not, in greater anger, to prosper in his sins, but in His mercy scourges him with the left, that He may place him purified on His right hand. Matthew 25:33 The reading of most copies, make Your right hand well known to me, may be referred either to Christ, or to eternal happiness: for God has not a right hand in bodily shape, as He has not that anger which is aroused into violent passion.

13. But what he adds, and those fettered in heart in wisdom; other copies read, instructed, not lettered: the Greek verb, expressing both senses, only differing by a single syllable. But since these also, as it is said, put their feet in the fetters of wisdom, are taught wisdom (he means the feet of the heart, not of the body), and bound by its golden chains Sirach 6:24 depart not from the path of God, and become not runaways from him; whichever reading we adopt, the truth in the meaning is safe. Them thus lettered, or instructed in heart in wisdom, God makes so well known in the New Testament, that they despised all things for the Faith which the impiety of Jews and Gentiles abhorred; and allowed themselves to be deprived of those things which in the Old Testament are thought high promises by those who judge after the flesh.

14. And as when they became so well known, as to despise these things, and by setting their affections on things eternal, gave a testimony through their sufferings (whence they are called witnesses or martyrs in the Greek), they endured for a long while many bitter temporal afflictions. This man of God gives heed to this, and the prophetic spirit under the name of Moses continues thus, Return, O Lord, how long? And be softened concerning Your servants Psalm 89:13. These are the words of those, who, enduring many evils in that persecuting age, become known because their hearts are bound in the chain of wisdom so firmly, that not even such hardships can induce them to fly from their Lord to the good things of this world.

How long will You hide Your face from me, O Lord? occurs in another Psalm, in unison with this sentence, Return, O Lord, how long? And that they who, in a most carnal spirit, ascribe to God the form of a human body, may know that the turning away and turning again of His countenance is not like those motions of our own frame, let them recollect these words from above in the same Psalm, You have set our misdeeds before You, and our secret sins in the light of Your countenance.

How then does he say in this passage, Return, that God may be favourable, as if He had turned away His face in anger; when as in the former he speaks of God's anger in such a manner, as to insinuate that He had not turned away His countenance from the misdeeds and the course of life of those He was angry with, but rather had set them before Him, and in the light of His countenance? The word, How long, belongs to righteousness beseeching, not indignant impatience. Be softened, some have rendered by a verb, soften.

But be softened avoids an ambiguity; since to soften is a common verb: for he may be said to soften who pours out prayers, and he to whom they are poured out: for we say, I soften you, and I soften toward you. 15. Next, in anticipation of future blessings, of which he speaks as already vouchsafed, he says, We are satisfied with Your mercy in the morning Psalm 89:14. Prophecy has thus been kindled for us, in the midst of these toils and sorrows of the night, like a lamp in the darkness, until day dawn, and the Day-star arise in our hearts. 2 Peter 1:19 For blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God: then shall the righteous be filled with that blessing for which they hunger and thirst now, Matthew 5:8, 6 while, walking in faith, they are absent from the Lord. 2 Corinthians 5:6 Hence are the words, In Your presence is fullness of joy: and, Early in the morning they shall stand by, and shall look up: and as other translators have said it, We shall be satisfied with Your mercy in the morning; then they shall be satisfied.

As he says elsewhere, I shall be satisfied, when Your glory shall be revealed. So it is said, Lord, show us the Father, and it suffices us: and our Lord Himself answers, I will manifest Myself to Zion; John 14:8, 21 and until this promise is fulfilled, no blessing satisfies us, or ought to do so, lest our longings should be arrested in their course, when they ought to be increased until they gain their objects. And we rejoiced and were glad all the days of our life. Those days are days without end: they all exist together: it is thus they satisfy us: for they give not way to days succeeding: since there is nothing there which exists not yet because it has not reached us, or ceases to exist because it has passed; all are together: because there is one day only, which remains and passes not away: this is eternity itself.

These are the days respecting which it is written, What man is he that lusts to live, and would fain see good days? These days in another passage are styled years: where unto God it is said, But You are the same, and Your years shall not fail: for these are not years that are accounted for nothing, or days that perish like a shadow: but they are days which have a real existence, the number of which he who thus spoke, Lord, let me know mine end (that is, after reaching what term I shall remain unchanged, and have no further blessing to crave), and the number of my days, what it is (what is, not what is not): prayed to know.

He distinguishes them from the days of this life, of which he speaks as follows, Behold, You have made my days as it were a span long, which are not, because they stand not, remain not, but change in quick succession: nor is there a single hour in them in which our being is not such, but that one part of it has already passed, another is about to come, and none remains as it is. But those years and days, in which we too shall never fail, but evermore be refreshed, will never fail.

Let our souls long earnestly for those days, let them thirst ardently for them, that there we may be filled, be satisfied, and say what we now say in anticipation, We have been satisfied, etc. We have been comforted again now, after the time that You have brought us low, and for the years wherein we have seen evil Psalm 89:15.

16. But now in days that are as yet evil, let us speak as follows. Look upon Your servants, and upon Your works Psalm 89:16. For Your servants themselves are Your works, not only inasmuch as they are men, but as Your servants, that is, obedient to Your commands. For we are His workmanship, created not merely in Adam, but in Christ Jesus, unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them: Ephesians 2:10 for it is God which works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure. Philippians 2:13 And direct their sons: that they may be right in heart, for to such God is bountiful; for God is bountiful to Israel, to those that are right in heart....

17. And let the brightness of the Lord our God be upon us Psalm 89:17; whence the words, O Lord, the light of Your countenance is marked upon us. And, Make Thou straight the works of our hands upon us: that we may do them not for hope of earthly reward: for then they are not straight, but crooked. In many copies the Psalm goes thus far, but in some there is found an additional verse at the end, as follows, And make straight the work of our hands. To these words the learned have prefixed a star, called an asterisk, to show that they are found in the Hebrew, or in some other Greek translations, but not in the Septuagint. The meaning of this verse, if we are to expound it, appears to me this, that all our good works are one work of love: for love is the fulfilling of the Law. Romans 13:10 For as in the former verse he had said, And the works of our hands make Thou straight upon us, here he says work, not works, as if anxious to show, in the last verse, that all our works are one, that is, are directed with a view to one work. For then are works righteous, when they are directed to this one end: for the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned. 1 Timothy 1:5 There is therefore one work, in which are all, faith which works by love: Galatians 5:6 whence our Lord's words in the Gospel, This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent. John 6:29 Since, therefore, in this Psalm, both old and new life, life both mortal and everlasting, years that are counted for nought, and years that have the fullness of loving-kindness and of true joy, that is, the penalty of the first and the reign of the Second Man, are marked so very clearly; I imagine, that the name of Moses, the man of God, became the title of the Psalm, that pious and right-minded readers of the Scriptures might gain an intimation that the Mosaic laws, in which God appears to promise only, or nearly only, earthly rewards for good works, without doubt contains under a veil some such hopes as this Psalm displays. But when any one has passed over to Christ, the veil will be taken away: 2 Corinthians 3:15 and his eyes will be unveiled, that he may consider the wonderful things in the law of God, by the gift of Him, to whom we pray, Open Thou my eyes, and I shall see the wondrous things of Your law.

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