

# Exposition on Psalm 97

by St. Augustine

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*St. Augustine expounds on Psalm 97, revealing Christ as the center of the psalm's message and the source of joy, righteousness, and judgment.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 96:1, Psalm 96:3-7, John 9:39, Acts 14:14, Romans 10:4, Ephesians 2:20

**Topics:** "Christ Centered", "Resurrection Joy"

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## Description

St. Augustine preaches about the importance of staying rooted in Christ to understand the Scriptures correctly, emphasizing the need to fix our understanding on Him to avoid uncertainty and doubt. He delves into the resurrection of the flesh symbolized by the earth restored, highlighting the joy in the restoration brought by Christ's resurrection. St. Augustine reflects on the preaching of the word of God reaching all corners of the earth, symbolized by the isles, and the steadfastness of the Church amidst persecutions. He explores the concepts of righteousness, judgment, and the temporal punishment of the ungodly, contrasting it with the fire of salvation for the redeemed.

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## Transcript

1. ...This Psalm is entitled, A Psalm of David's, when his land was restored. Let us refer the whole to Christ, if we wish to keep the road of a right understanding: let us not depart from the corner stone, Ephesians 2:20 lest our understanding suffer a fall: in Him let that become fixed, which wavered with unstable motion; let that rest upon Him, which before was waving to and fro in uncertainty. Whatever doubt a man has in his mind when he hears the Scriptures of God, let him not depart from Christ; when Christ has been revealed to him in the words, let him then be assured that he has understood; but before he arrives at the understanding of Christ, let him not presume that he has understood. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believes. Romans 10:4 What does this mean, and how are these words understood in Christ, When his land was restored?...

2. The earth restored is the resurrection of the flesh; for after His resurrection, all those things which are sung of in the Psalm were done. Let us then hear a Psalm full of joy on the restoration of the Earth. Let the Lord our God excite in us a hope and a pleasure worthy of so great a thing; may He rule our discourse, that it be fit for your hearts, that whatever joy our heart does feel in such sights, He may bring on to our tongue, and thence conduct it into your ears, then to your heart, thence to your actions.

3. ...The Lord is King, let the earth be glad: yea, let the multitude of the isles be joyous Psalm 96:1. It is so indeed, because the word of God has been preached not in the continent alone, but also in those isles

which lie in mid sea: even these are full of Christians, full of the servants of God. For the sea does not retard Him who made it. Where ships can approach, cannot the words of God? The isles are filled. But figuratively the isles may be taken for all the Churches. Why isles? Because the waves of all temptations roar around them. But as an isle may be beaten by the waves which on every side dash around it, yet cannot be broken, and rather itself does break the advancing waves, than by them is broken: so also the Churches of God, springing up throughout the world, have suffered the persecutions of the ungodly, who roar around them on every side; and behold the isles stand fixed, and at last the sea is calmed.

4. Clouds and darkness are round about Him: righteousness and judgment are the direction of His seat Psalm 96:2....The Lord Himself says: For judgment I have come into this world; that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind. John 9:39 They who seem unto themselves to see, who think themselves wise, who think healing not needful for them, that they may be made blind, may not understand. And that they which see not may see; that they who confess their blindness may obtain to be enlightened. Let there be therefore clouds and darkness round about Him, for those who have not understood Him: for those who confess and humble themselves, righteousness and judgment are the direction of His seat. He called those who believe in Him His seat: for from them has He made Himself a seat, since in them Wisdom sits; for the Son of God is the Wisdom of God. But we have heard from another passage of Scripture a strong confirmation of this interpretation. The soul of the righteous is the seat of Wisdom. Because then they who have believed in Him have been made righteous: justified by faith, they have become His own seat: He sits in them, judging from them, and guiding them....

5. There shall go a fire before Him, and burn up His enemies on every side Psalm 96:3. We remember having read in the Gospel, He shall say, Depart into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. Matthew 25:41 I do not think it is said of that fire. Why do I not? Because he speaks of some fire, which shall go before Him, before He comes to judgment. For it is said, that the fire goes before Him, and burns up His enemies on every side, that is, throughout the whole world. That fire will burn after His advent: this, on the contrary, will go before Him. What fire then is this?...Behold, we have understood the fire that goes before Him, that is to be understood of a kind of temporal punishment of the unbelieving and ungodly: let us understand the fire, if possible, of the salvation of the redeemed also; for thus we had proposed. The Lord Himself says: I have come to send fire on the earth: Luke 12:49 fire in the same way as a sword; as in another passage He says, that He was not come to send peace, but a sword, upon earth. Matthew 10:34 The sword to divide, the fire to burn: but each salutary: for the sword of His own word has in salutary wise separated us from evil habits. For He brought a sword, and separated every believer either from his father who believed not in Christ, or from his mother in like manner unbelieving: or at least, if we were born of Christian parents, from his ancestors. For no man among us had not either a grandsire, or great grandsire, or some ancestry among the heathen, and in that unbelief which is accursed before God. We are separated from that which we were before; but the sword which separates, but slays not, has cut between us. In the same way the fire also: I have come to send fire upon the earth. Believers in Him were set on fire, they received the flame of love: and for this reason when the Holy Spirit itself had been sent to the Apostles, It thus appeared: cloven tongues, like as of fire. Acts 2:3 Burning with this fire they set out on their march through the world, to burn and set on fire His enemies on every side. What enemies of His? They who forsaking the God who made them, adored the idols they had made....

6. His lightnings gave shine unto the world Psalm 96:4. This is great joy. Do we not see? Is it not clear? His lightnings have shined unto the whole world: His enemies have been set on fire, and burnt. All that gainsaid has been burnt, and His lightnings have given shine unto the world. How have they shone? That

the world might at length believe. Whence were the lightnings? From the clouds. What are the clouds of God? The preachers of the truth. But you see a cloud, misty and dark in the sky, and it has I know not what hidden within it. If there be lightning from the cloud, a brightness shines forth: from that which you despised, has burst forth that which you may dread. Our Lord Jesus Christ therefore sent His Apostles, as His preachers, like clouds: they were seen as men, and were despised; as clouds appear, and are despised, until what you wonder at gleams from them. For they were in the first place men encumbered with flesh, weak; then, men of low station, unlearned, ignoble: but there was within what could lighten forth; there was in them what could flash abroad. Peter a fisherman approached, prayed, and the dead arose. Acts 9:40 His human form was a cloud, the splendour of the miracle was the lightning. So in their words, so in their deeds, when they do things to be wondered at, and utter words to be wondered at, His lightnings gave shine unto the world; the earth saw it, and was afraid. Is it not true? Does not the whole Christian world at length exclaim, Amen, afraid at the lightnings which burst forth from those clouds?

7. The hills melted like wax at the presence of the Lord Psalm 96:5. Who are the hills? The proud. Every high thing raising itself against God, at the deeds of Christ and of the Christians, trembled, yielded, and when I say, what has been already said, melted, a better word cannot be found. The hills melted like wax at the presence of the Lord. Where is the elevation of powers? Where the hardness of the unbelieving? The Lord was a fire unto them, they melted at His presence like wax; so long hard, until that fire was applied. Every height has been levelled; it dares not now blaspheme Christ: and though the Pagan believes not in Him, he blasphemes Him not; though not as yet become a living stone, yet the hard hill has been subdued. At the presence of the Lord of the whole earth: not of the Jews only, but of the Gentiles also, as the Apostle says; for He is not the God of the Jews alone, but of the Gentiles also. Romans 3:29 He is therefore the Lord of the whole earth, the Lord Jesus Christ born in Judæa, but not born for Judæa alone, because before He was born He created all men; and He who created, also new created, all men.

8. The heavens have declared His righteousness: and all the people have seen His glory Psalm 96:6. What heavens have declared? The heavens declare the glory of God. Who are the heavens? Those who have become His seat; for as God sits in the heavens, so does He sit in the Apostles, so does He sit in the preachers of the Gospel. Even thou, if you will, shall be a heaven. Do you wish to be so? Purge from your heart the earth. If you have not earthly lusts, and hast not in vain uttered the response, that you have lifted up your heart, you shall be a heaven. If you be risen with Christ, says the Apostle to believers, set your affection on things above, not on things of the earth. Colossians 3:1-2 You have begun to set your affection upon things above, not on things upon earth; have you not become a heaven? Thou carriest flesh, and in your heart you are already a heaven; for your conversation will be in heaven. Philippians 3:20 Being such, thou also declarest Christ; for who of the faithful declares not Christ?...Therefore the whole Church preaches Christ, and the heavens declare His righteousness; for all the faithful, whose care it is to gain unto God those who have not yet believed, and who do this from love, are heavens. From them God thunders forth the terror of His judgment; and he who was unbelieving trembles, and is alarmed, and believes. He shows unto men what power Christ had throughout the world, by pleading with them, and leading them to love Christ. For how many this day have led their friends either to some pantomimist, or flute-player? Why, except from their liking him? And do ye love Christ. For He who conquered the world has exhibited such spectacles, as that no man can say that he finds in them cause for blame. For each person's favourite in the theatre is often vanquished there. But no man is vanquished in Christ: there is no reason for shame. Seize, lead, draw, whom you may: be without fear, you are leading unto Him, who displeases not those who see Him; and ask ye Him to enlighten them, that they may behold to good account.

9. Confounded be all they that worship carved images Psalm 96:7. Hath not this come to pass? Have they not been confounded? Are they not daily confounded? For carved images are images wrought by the hand. Why are all who worship carved images confounded? Because all people have seen His glory. All nations now confess the glory of Christ: let those who worship stones be ashamed. Because those stones were dead, we have found a living Stone; indeed those stones never lived, so that they cannot be called even dead; but our Stone is living, and has ever lived with the Father, and though He died for us, He revived, and lives now, and death shall no more have dominion over Him. Romans 6:9 This glory of His the nations have acknowledged; they leave the temples, they run to the Churches. Do they still seek to worship carved images? Have they not chosen to forsake their idols? They have been forsaken by their idols. Who glory in their idols. But there is a certain disputer who seems unto himself learned, and says, I do not worship that stone, nor that image which is without sense;...I worship not this image but I adore what I see, and serve him whom I see not. Who is that? Some invisible deity, he replies, who presides over that image. By giving this account of their images, they seem to themselves able disputants, because they do not worship idols, and yet do worship devils. The things, brethren, says the Apostle, which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice unto devils, and not to God; we know that an idol is nothing: and that what the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God; and I would not that you should have fellowship with devils. Let them not therefore excuse themselves on this ground, that they are not devoted to insensate idols; they are rather devoted to devils, which is more dangerous. For if they were only worshipping idols, as they would not help them, so they would not hurt them; but if you worship and serve devils, they themselves will be your masters....

10. But observe holy men, who are like the Angels. When you have found some holy man who serves God, if you wish to worship him instead of God, he forbids you: he will not arrogate to himself the honour due to God, he will not be unto you as God, but be with you under God. Thus did the holy Apostles Paul and Barnabas. They preached the word of God in Lycaonia. When they had performed wonderful works in Lycaonia, the people of that country brought victims, and wished to sacrifice to them, calling Barnabas Jupiter, and Paul Mercury: they were not pleased.

Did they perchance refuse to be sacrificed to, because they abhorred to be compared to devils? No, but because they shuddered at divine honour being paid to men. Their own words show this: it is no guess of ours; for the text of the book goes on to say how they were moved. Acts 14:14-15 ...Just then, as good men forbade those who had wished to worship them as gods, and wish rather that God alone be worshipped, God alone be adored, to God alone sacrifice be offered, not to themselves; so also all the holy Angels seek His glory whom they love; endeavour to impel and to excite to the contemplation of Him all whom they love: Him they declare to them, not themselves, since they are angels; and because they are soldiers, they study only how to seek the glory of their Captain; but if they have sought their own glory, they are condemned as usurpers.

Such were the devil and his angels; he claimed for himself divine honour, and for all his demons; he filled the Pagan temples, and persuaded them to offer images and sacrifices to himself. Was it not better to worship holy Angels than devils? They answer: we do not worship devils; we worship angels, as you call them, the powers and the ministers of the great God. I wish ye would worship them: ye would easily learn from themselves not to worship them. Hear an Angel teaching. He was teaching a disciple of Christ, and showing him many wonders in the Revelation of John: and when some wonderful vision had been shown him, he trembled, and fell down at the Angel's feet; but that Angel, who sought not but the glory of God, said, See thou do it not; for I am a fellow-servant of you, and of your brethren the prophets.

Revelation 19:10 What then, my brethren? Let no man say, I fear lest the Angel may be angry with me, if I worship him not as my God. He is then angry with you, when you have chosen to worship him: for he is righteous, and loves God. As devils are angry if they are not worshipped, so are Angels angry if they are worshipped instead of God. But lest the weak and trembling heart perchance say unto itself: If then the demons are incensed because they are not worshipped, I fear to offend them; what can even their chief the devil do unto you?

If he had any power over us no one of us would remain. Are not daily so many things said against him by the mouth of Christians, and yet the harvest of Christians increases. When you are angry with the most depraved of your slaves, you give him the name, Satan, Devil. Perhaps in this thou dost err, since you say it to a man, and your immoderate anger hurries you to revile the image of God: and yet you choose a term thou deeply hatest, to apply to him. If he could, would he not revenge himself?

But it is not allowed: and he does so much only as is allowed him. For when he wished to tempt Job, he had to ask power to do so: Job 1:11 and he could do nothing had he not received power. Why then do you not fearlessly worship God, without whose will no one hurts you, and by whose permission you are chastened, not overcome? For if it shall have pleased the Lord your God to permit some man to hurt you, or some spirit: He will chasten you, that you may cry unto Him: Confounded, therefore, be all they that delight in vain gods: worship Him, all you His angels.

Let Pagans learn to worship God: they wish to worship Angels: let them imitate Angels, and worship Him who is worshipped by Angels. Worship Him, all you His angels. Let that Angel worship who was sent to Cornelius (for worshipping Him he sent Cornelius to Peter), himself Peter's fellow-servant; let him worship Christ, Peter's Lord. Worship Him, all you gods!

11. Sion heard of it, and rejoiced Psalm 96:8. What did Sion hear? That all His Angels worship Him....For the Church was not as yet among the Gentiles; in Judaea the Jews had some of them believed, and the very Jews who believed thought that they only belonged to Christ: the Apostles were sent to the Gentiles, Cornelius was preached to; Cornelius believed, was baptized, and they who were with Cornelius were also baptized. Acts 10:47 But ye know what happened, that they might be baptized: the reader indeed has not reached this point, but, nevertheless, some recollect; and let those who do not recollect, hear briefly from me. The Angel was sent to Cornelius: the Angel sent Cornelius to Peter; Peter came to Cornelius. And because Cornelius and his household were Gentiles, and uncircumcised: lest they might hesitate to give the Gospel to the uncircumcised: before Cornelius and his household were baptized, the Holy Spirit came, and filled them, and they began to speak with tongues. Now the Holy Spirit had not fallen upon any one who had not been baptized: but upon these It fell before baptism. For Peter might hesitate whether he might baptize the uncircumcised: the Holy Spirit came, they began to speak with tongues; the invisible gift was given, and took away all doubt about the visible Sacrament; they were all baptized....What did Sion hear, and rejoice at? That the Gentiles also had received the word of God. One wall had come, but the corner existed not as yet. The name Sion is here peculiarly given to the Church which was in Judaea. Sion heard of it, and rejoiced: and the daughters of Judah were glad. Thus it is written, The apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard. See if the daughters of Judaea rejoiced not. What did they hear? That the Gentiles had also received the word of God....Therefore, The daughters of Judah rejoiced because of Your judgments, O Lord. What is, because of Your judgments? Because in any nation, and in any people, he that serves Him is accepted of Him: for He is not the God of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles. Romans 3:29

12. See if this be not the reason for the joy of the daughters of Judah. For Thou, Lord, art most high over all the earth Psalm 96:9. Not in Judā'a alone, but over Jerusalem; not over Sion only, but over all the earth. To this whole earth the judgments of God prevailed, so that it assembled its nations from every quarter: judgments with which they who have cut themselves off have no communion: they neither hear the prophecy, nor see its completion; For Thou, Lord, art most high over all the earth: You are exalted far above all gods. What is far? For it is said of Christ. What then means far, except that You may be acknowledged coequal with the Father? What means, above all gods? Who are they? Idols have not life, have not sense: devils have life and sense; but they are evil. What great thing is it that Christ is exalted above devils? He is exalted above devils: but neither is this very great; the heathen gods indeed are devils, but He is far above all gods. Even men are styled gods: I have said, You are gods: and you are all the children of the Most Highest: again it is written, God stands in the congregation of princes: He is a Judge among gods. Jesus Christ our Lord is exalted above all: not only above idols, not only above devils; but above all righteous men. Even this is not enough; above all Angels also: for whence otherwise is this, Worship Him, all you gods? You are far exalted above all gods.

13. What then do we all, who have assembled before Him, before Him who is exalted far above all gods? He has given us a brief commandment, O you that love the Lord, see that you hate the thing which is evil! Psalm 96:10. Christ does not deserve that with Him you should love avarice. You love Him: you should hate what He hates. There is a man who is your enemy, he is what you are; you are the work of one Creator, with the same nature: and yet if your son were to speak unto your enemy, and come to his house, and constantly converse with him, you would be inclined to disinherit him; because he speaks with your enemy. And how so? Because you seem to say justly, You are my enemy's friend, and do you seek anything of my property? Attend then. You love Christ: avarice is Christ's foe; why speak with her? I say not, speak with her; why do you serve her? For Christ commands you to do many things, and thou dost them not; she commands you, and thou dost them. Christ commands you to clothe the poor man: and thou dost it not; avarice bids you defraud, and this thou dost in preference. If such be the case, if such you are, do not very confidently promise yourself Christ's heritage. But you say, I love Christ. Hence it appears that you love what is good, if you shall be found to hate what is evil....

14. Because then he had said above, see that you hate the thing which is evil, lest ye should fear to hate evil, lest he should kill you, he adds instantly, The Lord preserves the souls of His servants. Hear Him preserving the souls of His servants, and saying, Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. Matthew 10:28 He who has most power against you, slays the body. What has he done unto you? What he also did to the Lord your God. Why do you love to have what Christ has, if you fear to suffer what Christ did? He came to bear your life, temporal, weak, subject unto death. Surely fear to die, if you can avoid dying. What you can not avoid through your nature, why do you not undergo by faith? Let the adversary who threatens take away from you that life, God gives you another life: for He gave you this life also, and without His will even this shall not be taken from you; but if it be His will that it be taken from you, He has a life to give you in exchange; fear not to be robbed for His sake. Are you unwilling to put off a patched garment? He will give you a robe of glory. What robe do you tell me of? This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 1 Corinthians 15:53 This very flesh of yours shall not perish. Your enemy can rage as far as to your death: he has not power beyond, either over your soul, or even over your flesh; for although he scatter your flesh about, he hinders not the resurrection. Men were fearful for their life: and what said the Lord unto them? The very hairs of your head are all numbered. Matthew 10:30 Do you, who lovest not a single hair, fear the loss of your life? All things are numbered with God. He who created all things, will restore all things. They were not, and they were created: they were,

and shall they not be restored?...He shall deliver them from the hand of the ungodly.

15. But perhaps you will say, I lose this light. There is sprung up a light for the righteous Psalm 96:11. What light do you fear you may lose? Do you fear you may be in darkness? Fear not you may lose light; nay, fear lest while you are guarding against the loss of this light, you may lose that true light. For we see to whom that light is given which you fear losing, and with whom it is shared. Do the righteous only see this sun, when He makes it rise over the just and unjust, and rains upon the just and unjust? Matthew 5:45 Wicked men, robbers, the unchaste, beasts, flies, worms, see that light together with you. What sort of light does He keep for the righteous, who gives this even to such as these? Deservedly the Martyrs beheld this light in faith; for they who despised this light of the sun, had some light in their eyes, which they longed for, who rejected this. Do you imagine that they were really in misery, when they walked in chains? Spacious was the prison to the faithful, light were the chains to the confessors. They who preached Christ amid their torments, had joy in the iron-chair. What light has sprung up for the righteous? Not that which springs up for the unrighteous; not that which He causes to rise over the good and bad. There is a different light which springs up to the righteous; of which light, that never rose upon themselves, the unrighteous shall in the end say, Therefore have we erred from the way of truth, and the light of righteousness has not shined upon us, and the sun of righteousness rose not upon us. Wisdom 5:6 Behold, by loving this sun they have lain in the darkness of the heart. What did it profit them to have seen with their eyes this sun, and not in mind to have seen that light? Tobit was blind, but he used to teach his son the way of God. You know this, that Tobit warned his son, and said to him, Son, give alms of your substance; because that alms suffer not to come into darkness. Tobit 4:7, 10 Even he who was in darkness spoke thus....Do you wish to know that light? Be true-hearted. What is, be true-hearted? Be not of a crooked heart before God, withstanding His will, and wishing to bend Him unto you, and not to rule yourself to please Him; and you will feel the joyful gladness which all the true-hearted know.

16. Be glad, you righteous Psalm 96:12. Perhaps already the faithful hearing the word, Be glad, are thinking of banquets, preparing cups, waiting for the season of roses; because it is said, Be glad, you righteous! See what follows, Be glad in the Lord. You are waiting for the season of spring, that you may be glad: you have the Lord for joyful gladness, the Lord is always with you, He has no special season; you have Him by night, you have Him by day. Be true-hearted; and you have ever joy from Him. For that joy which is after the fashion of the world, is not true joy. Hear the prophet Isaiah: There is no joy, says my God, to the wicked. Isaiah 57:21 What the wicked call joy is not joy, such as he knew who made no account of their joy: let us believe him, brethren. He was a man, but he knew both kinds of joy. He certainly knew the joys of the cup, for he was a man, he knew the joy of the table, he knew the joys of marriage, he knew those joys worldly and luxurious. He who knew them says with confidence, There is no joy to the wicked, says the Lord. But it is not man who speaks, it is the Lord....But you say, I see not that light which Isaiah saw. Believe, and you shall see it. For perhaps you have not the eye to see it; for it is an eye by which that beauty is discerned. For as there is an eye of the flesh, by means of which this light is seen: so there is an eye of the heart, by which that joy is perceived: perhaps that eye is wounded, dimmed, disturbed by passion, by avarice, by indulgence, by senseless lust; your eye is disturbed: you can not see that light. Believe, before you see; you shall be healed, and shall see.

17. And confess to the remembrance of His holiness. Now made glad, now rejoicing in the Lord, confess unto Him; for unless it were His will, you would not rejoice in Him. For the Lord Himself says: These things I have spoken to you: that in Me ye might have peace. But in the world you shall have tribulation. John 16:33 If you are Christians, look for tribulations in this world; look not for more peaceful and better times.

Brethren, you deceive yourselves; what the Gospel does not promise you, promise not to yourselves. You know what the Gospel says; we are speaking to Christians; we ought not to disobey the faith. The Gospel says this, that in the last times many evils, many stumbling-blocks, many tribulations, much iniquity, shall abound; but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. Matthew 24:3-13 The love, it says, of many shall wax cold. Whosoever then has been steadfastly fervent in spirit, as the Apostle says, fervent in spirit, Romans 12:11 his love shall not wax cold: because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, which is given unto us. Romans 5:5 Let no man therefore promise himself what the Gospel does not promise. Behold, happier times will come, and I am doing this, and purchasing this. It is good for you to listen to Him who is not deceived, nor has deceived any man, who promised you joy not here, but in Himself; and when all here has passed away, to hope that with Him you will for ever reign; lest when thou dost wish to reign here, you may neither enjoy gladness here, nor find it there.

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