

Exposition on Psalm 99

by St. Augustine

The sermon emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the Lord's power and authority, and of living a life of righteousness and holiness.

Scripture: Psalm 98:1-2, Isaiah 66:1, Daniel 2:34, Matthew 5:44, Romans 13:10

Topics: "Christ Centered Worship", "Persecution And Faith"

Description

St. Augustine preaches about the importance of seeking Christ in the Psalms, Prophets, and Law, understanding that all scriptures point to Jesus. He emphasizes how believers in Christ may face anger and persecution from those who worship idols, but encourages fasting, prayer, and love for enemies. St. Augustine highlights the concept of believers becoming the throne of God through love and knowledge of His Law, and the significance of magnifying and worshiping God on His holy hill, symbolizing the Catholic Church as the great mountain that has filled the earth.

Transcript

1. Beloved brethren, it ought already to be known to you, as sons of the Church, and well instructed in the school of Christ through all the books of our ancient fathers, who wrote the words of God and the great things of God, that their wish was to consult for our good, who were to live at this period, believers in Christ; who, at a seasonable time came unto us, the first time, in humility; at the second, destined to come in exaltation....For thus it is said in the Psalms: Truth shall flourish out of the earth: and righteousness has looked down from heaven. Now, therefore, our whole design is, when we hear a Psalm, a Prophet, or the Law, all of which was written before our Lord Jesus Christ came in the flesh, to see Christ there, to understand Christ there. Attend therefore, beloved, to this Psalm, with me, and let us herein seek Christ; certainly He will appear to those who seek Him, who at first appeared to those who sought Him not; and He will not desert those who long for Him, who redeemed those who neglected Him. Behold, the Psalm begins concerning Him: of Him it is said:--

2. The Lord is King, be the people angry Psalm 98:1. For our Lord Jesus Christ began to reign, began to be preached, after He arose from the dead and ascended into heaven, after He had filled His disciples with the confidence of the Holy Spirit, that they should not fear death, which He had already killed in Himself. Our Lord Christ began then to be preached, that they who wished for salvation might believe in Him; and the peoples who worshipped idols were angry. They who worshipped what they had made were angry, because He by whom they were made was declared. He announced, in fact, through His disciples,

Himself, who wished them to be converted unto Him by whom they were made, and to be turned away from those things which they had made themselves. They were angry with their Lord in behalf of their idols, they who even if they were angry with their slave on their idol's account, were to be condemned. For their slave was better than their idol: for God made their slave, the carpenter made their idol. They were so angry in their idol's behalf, that they feared not to be angry with their Lord. But the words, be they angry, are a prediction, not a command; for in a prophecy it is that this is said, The Lord is King, be the people angry. Some good results even from the enraged people: let them be angry, and in their anger let the Martyrs be crowned....You heard when Jeremiah was being read before the reading of the Apostle, if you listened; ye saw therein the times in which we now live. He said, The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth, let them perish from the earth, and from under the heaven. Jeremiah 10:11 He said not, The gods that have not made the heavens and earth, let them perish from the heaven and from the earth; because they never were in heaven: but what did he say? Let them perish from the earth, and from under the heaven. As if, while the word earth was repeated, the repetition of the word heaven were wanting (because they never were in heaven): he repeats the earth twice, since it is under heaven. Let them perish from the earth, and from under the heaven, from their temples. Consider if this be not now taking place; if in a great measure it has not already happened: for what, or how much, has remained? The idols remained rather in the hearts of the pagans, than in the niches of the temples.

3. He who sits between the cherubims: thou dost understand, He is King: let the earth be stirred up....The Cherubim is the seat of God, as the Scripture shows us, a certain exalted heavenly throne, which we see not; but the Word of God knows it, knows it as His own seat: and the Word of God and the Spirit of God has Itself revealed to the servants of God where God sits. Not that God does sit, as does man; but thou, if you dost wish that God sit in you, if you will be good, shall be the seat of God; for thus is it written, The soul of the righteous is the seat of wisdom. Proverbs 12:23 For a throne is in our language called a seat. For some, conversant with the Hebrew tongue, have interpreted cherubim in the Latin language (for it is a Hebrew term) by the words, fullness of knowledge. Therefore, because God surpasses all knowledge, He is said to sit above the fullness of knowledge. Let there be therefore in you fullness of knowledge, and even you shall be the throne of God....He knows all things: for our hairs are numbered before God. Matthew 10:30 But the fullness of knowledge which He willed man to know is different from this; the knowledge which He willed you to have, pertains to the law of God. And who can, you may perhaps say unto me, perfectly know the Law, so that he may have within himself the fullness of the knowledge of the Law, and be able to be the seat of God? Be not disturbed; it is briefly told you what you have, if you dost wish to have the fullness of knowledge, and to become the throne of God: for the Apostle says, Love is the fulfilling of the Law. Romans 13:10 What follows then? You have lost the whole of your excuse. Ask your heart; see whether it has love. If there be love there, there is the fulfilment of the Law there also; already God dwells in you, you have become the throne of God. Be the people angry; what can the angry people do against him who has become the throne of God? You give heed unto them who rage against you: Who is it that sits within you, you give not heed. You have become a heaven, and do you fear the earth? For the Scripture says in another passage, that the Lord our God does declare, The heaven is My throne. Isaiah 66:1 If therefore even thou by having the fullness of knowledge, and by having love, hast been made the throne of God, you have become a heaven. For this heaven which we look up to with these eyes of ours, is not very precious before God. Holy souls are the heaven of God; the minds of the Angels, and all the minds of His servants, are the heaven of God.

4. The Lord is great in Sion, and high above all people Psalm 98:2....He whom I spoke to you of as above the Cherubims, is great in Sion. Ask thou now, what is Sion? We know Sion to be the city of God. The city

of Jerusalem is called Sion; and is so called according to a certain interpretation, for that Sion signifies watching, that is, sight and contemplation; for to watch is to look forward to, or gaze upon, or strain the eyes to see. Now every soul is a Sion, if it tries to see that light which is to be seen. For if it shall have gazed upon a light of its own, it is darkened; if upon His, it is enlightened. But, now that it is clear that Sion is the city of God; what is the city of God, but the Holy Church? For men who love one another, and who love their God who dwells in them, constitute a city unto God. Because a city is held together by some law; their very law is Love; and that very Love is God: for openly it is written, God is Love. 1 John 4:8 He therefore who is full of Love, is full of God; and many, full of love, constitute a city full of God. That city of God is called Sion; the Church therefore is Sion. In it God is great...

5. Do ye imagine, brethren, that they whose instruments re-echoed yesterday, are not angry with our fastings? But let us not be angry with them, but let us fast for them. For the Lord our God who sits in us has said, He has Himself commanded us to pray for our enemies, to pray for them that persecute us: Matthew 5:44 and as the Church does this, the persecutors are almost extinct....The drunken man does not offend himself, but he offends the sober man. Show me a man who is at last happy in God, lives gravely, sighs for that everlasting peace which God has promised him; and see that when he has seen a man dancing to an instrument, he is more grieved for his madness, than for a man who is in a frenzy from a fever. If then we know their evils, considering that we also have been freed from those very evils, let us grieve for them; and if we grieve for them, let us pray for them; and that we may be heard, let us fast for them. For we do not keep our own fasts in their holidays. Different are the fasts which we celebrate through the days of the approaching Passover, through different seasons which are fixed for us in Christ: but through their holidays we fast for this reason, that when they are rejoicing, we may groan for them. For by their joy they excite our grief, and cause us to remember how wretched they are as yet. But since we see many freed thence, where we also have been, we ought not to despair even of them. And if they are still enraged, let us pray; and if still a particle of earth that has remained behind be stirred up against us, let us continue in lamentation for them, that to them also God may grant understanding, and that with us they may hear those words, in which we are at this moment rejoicing.

6. All these very people, over whom You are great in Sion, Let them confess unto Your Name, which is great Psalm 98:3. Your Name was little when they were enraged: it has become great; let them now confess. In what sense do we say, that the Name of Christ was little, before it was spread abroad to so great an extent? Because His report is meant by His Name. His Name was small; already it has become great. What nation is there that has not heard of the Name of Christ? Therefore let now the people confess unto Your Name, which is great, who before were enraged with Your little Name. Wherefore shall they confess? Because it is wonderful and holy. Your very Name is wonderful and holy. He is so preached as crucified, so preached as humbled, so preached as judged, that He may come exalted, that He may come living, that He may come to judge in power. He spares at present the people who blaspheme Him, because the long-suffering of God leads to repentance. Romans 2:4 For He who now spares, will not always spare: nor will He, who is now being preached that He may be feared, fail to come to judge. He will come, my brethren, He will come: let us fear Him, and let us live so that we may be found on His right hand. For He will come, and will judge, so as to place some on the left hand, some on the right. Matthew 25:31-33 And He does not act in an uncertain manner, so as to err perchance between men, so that he who should be set on the right hand, be set on the left; or that he who ought to stand on the left, by a mistake of God should stand on the right: He cannot err, so as to place the evil where He ought to set the good; nor to place the good, where He should have set the evil. If He cannot err, we err, if we fear not; but if we have feared in this life, we shall not then have what to fear for. For the King's honour loves

judgment....

7. You have prepared equity; You have wrought judgment and righteousness in Jacob. For we too ought to have judgment, we ought to have righteousness; but He works in us judgment and righteousness, who created us in whom He might work them. How ought we too to have judgment and righteousness? You have judgment, when thou dost distinguish evil from good: and righteousness when you follow the good, and turnest aside from the evil. By distinguishing them, you have judgment; by doing, you have righteousness. Eschew evil, he says, and do good; seek peace, and ensue it. You should first have judgment, then righteousness. What judgment? That you may first judge what is evil, and what is good. And what righteousness? That you may shun evil, and do good. But this you will not gain from yourself; see what he has said, You have wrought judgment and righteousness in Jacob.

8. O magnify the Lord our God Psalm 98:5. Magnify Him truly, magnify Him well. Let us praise Him, let us magnify Him who has wrought the very righteousness which we have; who wrought it in us, Himself. For who but He who justified us, wrought righteousness in us? For of Christ it is said, who justifies the ungodly. Romans 4:5 ...And fall down before His footstool: for He is holy. What are we to fall down before? His footstool. What is under the feet is called a footstool, in Greek ■ ποτ■διον, in Latin Scabellum or Suppedaneum.

But consider, brethren, what he commands us to fall down before. In another passage of the Scriptures it is said, The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Isaiah 66:1 Does he then bid us worship the earth, since in another passage it is said, that it is God's footstool? How then shall we worship the earth, when the Scripture says openly, You shall worship the Lord your God? Deuteronomy 6:13 Yet here it says, fall down before His footstool: and, explaining to us what His footstool is, it says, The earth is My footstool.

I am in doubt; I fear to worship the earth, lest He who made the heaven and the earth condemn me; again, I fear not to worship the footstool of my Lord, because the Psalm bids me, fall down before His footstool. I ask, what is His footstool? And the Scripture tells me, the earth is My footstool. In hesitation I turn unto Christ, since I am herein seeking Himself: and I discover how the earth may be worshipped without impiety, how His footstool may be worshipped without impiety.

For He took upon Him earth from earth; because flesh is from earth, and He received flesh from the flesh of Mary. And because He walked here in very flesh, and gave that very flesh to us to eat for our salvation; and no one eats that flesh, unless he has first worshipped: we have found out in what sense such a footstool of our Lord's may be worshipped, and not only that we sin not in worshipping it, but that we sin in not worshipping. But does the flesh give life? Our Lord Himself, when He was speaking in praise of this same earth, said, It is the Spirit that quickens, the flesh profits nothing....But when our Lord praised it, He was speaking of His own flesh, and He had said, Except a man eat My flesh, he shall have no life in him.

John 6:54 Some disciples of His, about seventy, were offended, and said, This is an hard saying, who can hear it? And they went back, and walked no more with Him. It seemed unto them hard that He said, Except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, you have no life in you: they received it foolishly, they thought of it carnally, and imagined that the Lord would cut off parts from His body, and give unto them; and they said, This is a hard saying. It was they who were hard, not the saying; for unless they had been hard, and not meek, they would have said unto themselves, He says not this without reason, but there must be some latent mystery herein.

They would have remained with Him, softened, not hard: and would have learned that from Him which they who remained, when the others departed, learned. For when twelve disciples had remained with Him, on their departure, these remaining followers suggested to Him, as if in grief for the death of the former, that they were offended by His words, and turned back. But He instructed them, and says unto them, It is the Spirit that quickens, but the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.

John 6:63 Understand spiritually what I have said; you are not to eat this body which you see; nor to drink that blood which they who will crucify Me shall pour forth. I have commended unto you a certain mystery; spiritually understood, it will quicken. Although it is needful that this be visibly celebrated, yet it must be spiritually understood. 9. Moses and Aaron among His priests, and Samuel among such as call upon His Name: these called upon the Lord, and He heard them Psalm 98:6.

He spoke unto them out of the cloudy pillar Psalm 98:7....Of Moses it is not there stated that he was a priest. But if he was not this, what was he? Could he be anything greater than a priest? This Psalm declares that he also was himself a priest: Moses and Aaron among His priests. They therefore were the Lord's priests. Samuel is read of later in the Book of Kings: this Samuel is in David's times; for he anointed the holy David. Samuel from his infancy grew up in the temple....He mentions these: and by these desires us to understand all the saints.

Yet why has he here named those? Because we said that we ought here to understand Christ. Attend, holy brethren. He said above, O magnify the Lord our God: and fall down before His footstool, for He is holy: praising some one, that is, our Lord Jesus Christ; whose footstool is to be worshipped, because He assumed flesh, in which He was to appear before the human race; and wishing to show unto us that the ancient fathers also had preached of Him, because our Lord Jesus Christ is Himself the True Priest, he mentioned these, because God spoke unto them out of the cloudy pillar.

What means, out of the cloudy pillar? He was speaking figuratively. For if He spoke in some cloud, those obscure words predicted some one unknown, yet to be manifest. This unknown one is no longer unknown; for He is known by us, our Lord Jesus Christ....He who first spoke out of the cloudy pillar, has in Person spoken unto us in His footstool; that is, on earth, when He had assumed the flesh, for which reason we worship His footstool, for He is holy. He Himself used to speak out of the cloud, which was not then understood: He has spoken in His own footstool, and the words of His cloud have been understood.

They kept His testimonies, and the law that He gave them....You heard them, he says, O Lord our God: You were forgiving to them, O God Psalm 98:8. God is not said to be forgiving toward anything but sins: when He pardons sins, then He forgives. And what had He in them to punish, so that He was forgiving in pardoning them? He was forgiving in pardoning their sins, He was also forgiving in punishing them. For what follows? And punished all their own affections. Even in punishing them You were forgiving toward them: for not in remitting, but also in punishing their sins, have You been forgiving.

Consider, my brethren, what he has taught us here: attend. God is angry with him whom, when he sins, He scourges not: for unto him to whom He is truly forgiving, He not only remits sins, that they may not injure him in a future life; but also chastens him, that he delight not in continual sin.

10. Come, my brethren; if we ask how these were punished, the Lord will aid me to tell you. Let us consider these three persons, Moses, Aaron, and Samuel: and how they were punished, since he said, You have punished all their own affections: meaning those affections of theirs, which the Lord knew in

their hearts, which men knew not. For they were living in the midst of the people of God, without complaint from man. But what do we say? That perhaps the early life of Moses was sinful; for he fled from Egypt, after slaying a man.

Exodus 2:12-15 The early life of Aaron also was such as would displease God; for he allowed a maddened and infatuated people to make an idol to worship; Exodus 32:1-4 and an idol was made for God's people to worship. What sin did Samuel, who was given up when an infant to the temple? He passed all his life amid the holy sacraments of God: from childhood the servant of God. Nothing was ever said of Samuel, nothing by men. Perhaps God knew of somewhat there to chasten; since even what seems perfect unto men, unto that Perfection is still imperfect.

Artists show many of their works to the unskilful; and when the unskilful have pronounced them perfect, the artists polish them still further, as they know what is still wanting to them, so that men wonder at things they had imagined already perfect having received so much additional polish. This happens in buildings, and in paintings, and in embroidery, and almost in every species of art. At first they judge it to be already in a manner perfect, so that their eyes desire nothing further: but the judgment of the inexperienced eye is one, and that of the rule of art another.

Thus also these Saints were living before the eyes of God, as if faultless, as if perfect, as if Angels: but He who punished all their own affections, knew what was wanting in them. But He punished them not in anger, but in mercy: He punished them that He might perfect what He had begun, not to condemn what He had cast away. God therefore punished all their affections. How did He punish Samuel? where is this punishment?...What was said unto Moses was a type, not a punishment.

What punishment is death to an old man? What punishment was it, not to enter into that land, into which unworthy men entered? But what is said of Aaron? He also died an old man: his sons succeeded him in the priesthood: his son afterwards ruled in the priesthood: how did He punish Aaron also? Samuel also died a holy old man, leaving his sons as his successors. I seek for the punishment inflicted upon them, and according to men I find it not: but according to what I know the servants of God suffer every day, they were day by day punished.

Read ye, and see the punishments, and you also who are advanced bear the punishments. Every day they suffered from the obstinate people, every day they suffered from the ungodly livers; and were compelled to live among those whose lives they daily censured. This was their punishment. He unto whom it is small has not advanced far; for the ungodliness of others torments you in proportion as you have departed far from your own....

11. O magnify the Lord our God! Psalm 98:9. Again we magnify Him. He who is merciful even when He strikes, how is He to be praised, how is He to be magnified? Can you show this unto your son, and cannot God? For you are not good when thou dost caress your son, and evil when you strike him. Both when thou dost caress him you are a father, and when you strike him, you are his father: thou dost caress him, that he may not faint; you strike him, that he may not perish. O magnify the Lord our God, and worship Him upon His holy hill: for the Lord our God is holy. As he said above, O magnify the Lord our God and fall down before His footstool: now we have understood what it is to worship His footstool: thus also but now after he had magnified the Lord our God, that no man might magnify Him apart from His hill, he has also praised His hill. What is His hill? We read elsewhere concerning this hill, that a stone was cut from the hill without hands, and shattered all the kingdoms of the earth, and the stone itself increased. This is the

vision of Daniel which I am relating. This stone which was cut from the hill without hands increased, and became, he says, a great mountain, and filled the whole face of the earth. Daniel 2:34-35 Let us worship on that great mountain, if we desire to be heard. Heretics do not worship on that mountain, because it has filled the whole earth; they have stuck fast on part of it, and have lost the whole. If they acknowledge the Catholic Church, they will worship on this hill with us. For we already see how that stone that was cut from the mountain without hands has increased, and how great tracts of earth it has prevailed over, and unto what nations it has extended. What is the mountain whence the stone was hewn without hands? The Jewish kingdom, in the first place; since they worshipped one God. Thence was hewn the stone, our Lord Jesus Christ....That stone then was born of the mountain without hands: it increased, and by its increase broke all the kingdoms of the earth. It has become a great mountain, and has filled the whole face of the earth. This is the Catholic Church, in whose communion rejoice that you are. But they who are not in her communion, since they worship and praise God apart from this same mountain, are not heard unto eternal life; although they may be heard unto certain temporal things. Let them not flatter themselves, because God hears them in some things: for He hears Pagans also in some things. Do not the Pagans cry unto God, and it rains? Wherefore? Because He makes His sun to rise over the good and the bad, and sends rain upon the just and the unjust. Matthew 5:45 Boast not therefore, Pagan, that when you cry unto God, God sends rain, for He sends rain upon the just and the unjust. He has heard you in temporal things: He hears you not in things eternal, unless you have worshipped in His holy hill. Worship Him upon His holy hill: for the Lord our God is holy....

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