

Exposition on Psalm 142

by St. Augustine

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer, perseverance, and deliverance from our enemies, both visible and invisible, as we seek to follow Christ and bring our soul out of prison.

Scripture: Ephesians 3:17

Topics: "Prayer And Sincerity", "Persevering In Tribulation"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the importance of crying out to the Lord with sincerity and from the heart, emphasizing that true prayer is not just with words but with genuine affection. He delves into the significance of pouring out prayers before God in secret, highlighting the need to shut the door of our hearts to the tempter and open it to Christ. St. Augustine also reflects on enduring tribulations and persecution, encouraging believers to persevere in the paths of righteousness and trust in God's deliverance. He explores the concept of considering the right hand, symbolizing seeking God's promises, and the need to rely on God as our hope and deliverer in times of trouble and humility.

Transcript

1. ...With my voice have I cried unto the Lord Psalm 141:1. It were enough to say, with voice: not for nothing perhaps has my been added. For many cry unto the Lord, not with their own voice, but with the voice of their body. Let the inner man then, in whom Christ has begun to dwell by faith, Ephesians 3:17 cry unto the Lord, not with the din of his lips, but with the affection of his heart. God hears not, where man hears: unless you cry with the voice of lungs and side and tongue, man hears you not: your thought is your cry to the Lord. With my voice have I prayed unto the Lord. What he meant by, I have cried, he explained when he said, I have prayed. For they too who blaspheme, cry unto the Lord. In the former part he set down his crying, in the latter he explained what it was. As though it were demanded, With what cry have you cried unto the Lord? Unto the Lord, says he, I have prayed. My cry is my prayer, not reviling, not murmuring, not blaspheming.

2. I will pour out before Him my prayer Psalm 141:2. What is, before Him? In His sight. What is, in His sight? Where He sees. But where does He not see? For so do we say, 'where He sees,' as though somewhere He sees not. But in this assemblage of bodily substances men too see, animals too see: He sees where man sees not. For your thoughts no man sees, but God sees. There then pour out your prayer, where He alone sees, who rewards. For the Lord Jesus Christ bade you pray in secret: but if you know what your closet is, and cleanse it, there you pray to God. But you, says He, when you pray, enter

into your closet, and shut the door, and pray to your Father in secret, and He who sees in secret shall reward you. Matthew 6:6 If men are to reward you, pour out your prayer before men: if God is to reward you, pour out your prayer before Him; and close the door, lest the tempter enter. Therefore the Apostle, because it is in our power to shut the door, the door of our hearts, not of our walls, for in it is our closet,-- because it is in our power to shut this door, says, neither give place to the devil. Ephesians 4:27 But what is to shut the door? This door has as it were two leaves, desire and fear. Either thou desires something earthly, and he enters by this; or you fear something earthly, and he enters by that. Close then the door of fear and desire against the devil, open it to Christ. How do you open these folding doors to Christ? By desiring the kingdom of heaven, by fearing the fire of hell. By desire of this world the devil enters, by desire of eternal life Christ enters; by fear of temporal punishment the devil enters, by fear of everlasting fire Christ enters....

3. My tribulation I will proclaim in His sight. There is a repetition, both in the two preceding sentences, and in these which follow: the sentiments are two, but both twice expressed....For, in His sight, is the same as before Him; I will proclaim my tribulation, is the same as, I will pour out my prayer. When dost thou this? Being set in the midst of persecution, he says, while my spirit failed from me Psalm 141:3. Wherefore has your spirit failed, O martyr, set in tribulation? That I may not claim my strength as my own, that I may know that Another works in me the goodness I have. And men perhaps have heard that my spirit has failed within me, and have despaired of me, and have said, we have taken him captive, we have overpowered him; and You have known my paths. They thought me cast down, You saw me standing upright. They who persecuted me and had seized me, thought my feet entangled, but their feet were entangled, and they fell, but we are risen, and stand upright. For my eyes are ever unto the Lord, for He shall pluck my feet out of the net. I have persevered in walking, for he that shall persevere unto the end, the same shall be saved. Matthew 10:22 They thought me overpowered, but I continued walking. Where did I walk? In paths which they saw not, who thought me prisoner, in the paths of Your righteousness, in the paths of Your commandments....For every path is a way, but not every way is a path. Why then are those ways called paths, save because they are narrow? Broad is the way of the wicked, narrow the way of the righteous. That which is the way is also the ways, just as the Church is also the Churches, the heaven also the heavens: they are spoken of in the plural, they are spoken of also in the singular. On account of the unity of the Church it is one Church; My dove is one, she is the only one of her mother. Song of Songs 6:8 On account of the congregation of brethren in various places there are many Churches. The Churches of Judæa which are in Christ rejoiced, says Paul, Galatians 1:22-23 and they glorified God in me. Thus he spoke of Churches; and of one Church he thus speaks, Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the Church of God....

4. In this way, wherein I was walking, they hid a trap for me. This way wherein I was walking, is Christ; there have they laid a trap for me, who persecute me in Christ, for Christ's Name's sake. There then have they hid for me a trap. What in me do they hate, what in me do they persecute? That I am a Christian....For the heretics too wish to hide a stumbling-block for us in the Name of Christ, and are themselves deceived. What they think that they put in the way, they put outside the way, for they themselves are outside the way. They cannot set a trap where themselves are not....The Pagan thinks to put a stumbling-block in the way, when he says to me, You worship a crucified God. He finds fault with the Cross of Christ, which he understands not. He thinks that he sets in Christ, what he sets near the way. I will not depart from Christ, so shall I not fall from the way into the trap. Let him mock at Christ crucified, let me see the Cross of Christ on the foreheads of kings. What he laughs at, therein am I saved. Nought is prouder than a sick man, who laughs at his own medicine. If he laughed not at it, he would take it, and be

healed. The Cross is the sign of humility, but he through excess of pride acknowledges not that whereby may be healed the swelling of his soul. But if I acknowledge, I am walking in the way. So far am I from blushing at the Cross, that in no secret place do I keep the Cross of Christ, but bear it on my forehead. Many sacraments we receive, one in one way another in another: some as you know we receive with the mouth, some we receive over the whole body. But because the forehead is the seat of the blush of shame, He who said, Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me before men, of him will I be ashamed before My Father which is in heaven, Luke 9:26 set, so to speak, that very ignominy which the Pagans mock at, in the seat of our shame. You hear a man assail a shameless man and say, He has no forehead. What is, He has no forehead? He has no shame. Let me not have a bare forehead, let the Cross of my Lord cover it....

5. I considered upon the right hand, and saw Psalm 141:4. He considered upon the right hand, and saw: whoso considers upon the left hand, is blinded. What is to consider on the right hand? Where they will be to whom shall be said, Come, you blessed of My Father, etc., Matthew 25:34, 41 ...He goes on to say, and there was none that knew me. For when you fear all things, who knows what you regard, whether you direct your eyes to the right hand or to the left? If, in bearing, you seek the praise of men, you have regarded the left: if, in bearing, you seek the promises of God, you have regarded the right hand. Have you regarded the right hand, you shall see: have you regarded the left hand, you shall be blinded. But even when you see on the right hand, there will be none to know you. For who comforts you save the Lord? Flight has perished from me. He speaks as though he were hemmed in. Let the persecutors rejoice over him; he is overpowered, he is taken, he is hemmed in, he is conquered. Flight has perished from him who flees not. But he who flees not, suffers whatever he can for Christ: that is, he flees not in soul. For in body it is lawful to flee; it is allowed, it is permitted; for the Lord says, When they persecute you in one city, flee to another. Matthew 10:23 He then who flees not in soul, from him flight has perished. But it makes a difference why he flees not; whether because he is hemmed in, because he is caught, or because he is brave. For both from him that is caught flight has perished, and from him that is brave flight has perished. What flight then is to be avoided? What flight shall we allow to perish from us? That whereof the Lord speaks in the Gospel, The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, when he sees the wolf coming, flees. When he sees the ravager, why flees he? Because he cares not for the sheep.. ..In two ways a man's life is sought, either by his persecutors or by his lovers. So then there is none to seek my life, he said of them; verily they persecute my life, and they seek not my life. But if they seek my life, they will find it clinging to You: and if they know to seek it, they know also to imitate it.

6. Unto you have I cried, O Lord: I have said, You are my hope Psalm 141:5. When I endured, when I was in tribulation, I said, You are my hope. My hope here, therefore I endure. But my portion, not here, but in the land of the living. God gives a portion in the land of the living; but not something from Himself without Himself. What will He give to one that loves Him, save Himself?

7. Give heed unto my prayer, for much have I been humbled Psalm 141:6. Humbled by persecutors, humbled in confession. He humbles himself out of the sight of man: he is humbled by enemies in their sight. Therefore is he lifted up by Him both visibly and invisibly. Invisibly are the martyrs already lifted up; visibly shall they be lifted up, when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption in the resurrection of the dead; when this very part of him, against which alone her persecutors could rage, shall be renewed. Fear not them that kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Matthew 10:28 And what perishes? What kill they?...Why then are you anxious about the rest of your members, when you shall not lose even a hair? Deliver me from them that persecute me. From whom do you think that he prays to be delivered? From

men who persecuted him? Is it so? Are merely men our enemies? We have other enemies, invisible, who persecute us in another way. Man persecutes, that he may slay the body; another persecutes, that he ensnare the soul. Ephesians 2:2 ...There are then other enemies of ours too, from whom we ought to pray God to deliver us, lest they lead us astray, either by crushing us with troubles of this world, or alluring us by its enticements. Who are these enemies? Let us see whether they are plainly described by any servant of the Lord, by any soldier, now perfected, who has engaged with them. Hear the Apostle saying, We wrestle not against flesh and blood: Ephesians 6:12 as though he would say, Turn not your hatred against men; think not them your enemies; think not that it is by their hostility you are being bruised; these men whom you fear are flesh and blood....For they are strengthened over me. Who said, they are strengthened over me? The Body of Christ cries out; it is the voice of the Church; the members of Christ cry out, Much has the number of sinners increased. Because iniquity has abounded, the love of many waxes cold. Matthew 24:12

8. Bring forth my soul out of prison, that it may confess to Your Name Psalm 141:7. This prison has been variously understood by former writers. And perhaps it is the prison which is called in the title, the cave. For the title of this Psalm runs thus: Of understanding to David himself, a prayer when he was in the cave. That which is the cave, the same is also the prison. Two things have we set before us to understand, but when we have understood one, both will be understood.

A man's deserts make a prison. For in one dwelling place one man finds a house, another a prison....To some then it has seemed that the cave and prison are this world; and this the Church prays, that it may be brought out of prison, that is, from this world, from under the sun, where all is vanity. Beyond this world then God promises that we shall be in some sort of rest; therefore perhaps do we cry concerning this place, Bring my soul out of prison. Our soul by faith and hope is in Christ; Your life is hid with Christ in God.

But our body is in this prison, in this world....But some have said, that this prison and cave is this body, so that this is the meaning of, Bring my soul out of prison. But this interpretation too is somewhat at fault. For what great thing is it to say, Bring my soul out of prison, bring my soul out of the body? Do not the souls of robbers and wicked men go forth from the body, and go into worse punishment than here they have endured? What great request then is this, Bring my soul out of prison, when, sooner or later, it must needs come forth?

Perhaps the righteous says, Let me die now; bring forth my soul from this prison of the body. If he be too hasty, he has not love. He ought indeed to long for and desire, as the Apostle says, having a desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ, which is far better. But where is love? Therefore it follows, but to abide in the flesh is needful for you. Let God then lead us forth from the body, when He will. Our body too might be said to be a prison, not because that is a prison which God has made, but because it is under punishment and liable to death.

For there are two things to be considered in our body, God's workmanship, and the punishment it has deserved....Perhaps then he meant by, Bring my soul out of prison, bring my soul out of corruption. If thus we understand it, it is no blasphemy, the meaning is consistent. Lastly, brethren, as I think, he meant this; Bring my soul out of prison, bring it out of straitness. For to one who rejoices, even a prison is wide; to one in sorrow, a field is strait. Therefore prays he to be brought out of straitness.

For though in hope he have enlargement, yet in reality at present he is straitened....It is not the body that weighs down the soul, but the corruptible body. It is not the body then that makes the prison, but the corruption. Bring my soul out of prison, that it may give thanks to Your Name. Now the words which follow seem to come from the Head, our Lord Jesus Christ. And they are the same as yesterday's last words. Yesterday's last words, if you remember, were, I am alone, until I pass over. And here what are the last words? The righteous shall sustain me, until thou recompense me.

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