

# Exposition on Psalm 53

by St. Augustine

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of recognizing God's existence and living a life that is pleasing to Him, while also warning against the consequences of denying God and living an evil life.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 25:23, Matthew 10:39, Acts 9:4, 1 Corinthians 2:10, Galatians 4:19, Colossians 1:24

**Topics:** "Gods Presence", "Christian Apologetics"

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## Description

St. Augustine delves into Psalm 52, exploring the themes of acknowledging God's presence in times of pain and travail, the folly of denying God's existence, and the consequences of living in wickedness. He emphasizes the importance of seeking God and understanding His justice, especially in the face of corruption and evil beliefs. Augustine also reflects on Christ's crucifixion and the fear-driven actions of those who denied His divinity, highlighting the contrast between pleasing men and pleasing God.

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## Transcript

1. Of this Psalm we undertake to treat with you, as far as the Lord supplies us. A brother bids us that we may have the will, and prays that we may have the power. If anything in haste perchance I shall have passed over, He that even to us deigns to give what we shall be enabled to say, will supply it in you. The title of it is: At the end, for Maeleth, understanding to David himself. For Maeleth, as we find in interpretations of Hebrew names, seems to say, For one travailing, or in pain. But who there is in this world that travails and is in pain, the faithful acknowledge, because thereof they are. Christ here travails, Christ here is in pain: the Head is above, the members below. For one not travailing nor in pain would not say, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Acts 9:4 Him, with whom when persecuting He was travailing, being converted, He made to travail. For he also was himself afterwards enlightened, and grafted on those members which he used to persecute; being pregnant with the same love, he said, My little children, of whom again I travail, until Christ be formed in you. Galatians 4:19 For the members therefore of Christ, for His Body which is the Church, Colossians 1:24 for that same One Man, that is, for that very unity, whereof the Head is above, this Psalm is sung....Who are they, then, amid whom we travail and groan, if in the Body of Christ we are, if under Him, the Head, we live, if among His members we are counted? Who they are, hear ye.

2. The unwise man has said in his heart, There is no God Psalm 52:1. Such sort is it of men amid whom is pained and groans the Body of Christ. If such is this sort of men, of not many do we travail; as far as seems to occur to our thoughts, very few there are; and a difficult thing it is to meet with a man that says in

his heart, There is no God; nevertheless, so few there are, that, fearing amid the many to say this, in their heart they say it, for that with mouth to say it they dare not. Not much then is that which we are bid to endure, hardly is it found: uncommon is that sort of men that say in their heart, There is no God. But, if it be examined in another sense, is not that found to be in more men, which we supposed to be in men few and uncommon, and almost in none? Let them come forth into the midst that live evil lives, let us look into the doings of profligate, daring, and wicked men, of whom there is a great multitude; who foster day by day their sins, who, their acts having been changed into habit, have even lost sense of shame: this is so great a multitude of men, that the Body of Christ, set amid them, scarce dares to censure that which it is not constrained to commit, and deems it a great matter for itself that the integrity of innocence be preserved in not doing that which now, by habit, either it does not dare to blame, or if it shall have dared, there breaks out the censure and recrimination of them that live evil lives, more readily than the free voice of them that live good lives. And those men are such as say in their heart, There is no God. Such men I am confuting. Whence confuting? That their doings please God, they judge. He does not therefore affirm, some say, but The unwise man has said in his heart, There is no God. Which men do so far believe there is a God, that the same God they judge with what they do to be pleased. But if you being wise dost perceive, how the unwise man has said in his heart, There is no God, if you give heed, if you understand, if you examine; he that thinks that evil doings please God, Him he does not think to be God. For if God is, He is just; if He is just, injustice displeases Him, iniquity displeases. But you, when you think that iniquity pleases Him, dost deny God. For if God is one Whom iniquity displeases, but God seems not to you to be one whom iniquity displeases, and there is no God but one whom iniquity displeases, then when you say in your heart, God does countenance my iniquities, you say nothing else than, There is no God.

3. Let us advert also to that sense, which concerning Christ our Lord Himself, our Head Himself, does present itself. For when Himself in form of a servant Philipians 2:7 appeared on earth, they that crucified Him said, He is not God. Because Son of God He was, truly God He was. But they that are corrupted and have become abominable said what? He is not God: let us slay Him, He is not God. You have the voice of these very men in the book of Wisdom. For after there had gone before the verse, The unwise man has said in his heart, There is no God; as if reasons were required why the unwise man could say this, he has subjoined, Corrupted they are, and abominable have become in their iniquities Psalm 52:2. Hear ye those corrupted men. For they have said with themselves, not rightly thinking: Wisdom 2:1 corruption begins with evil belief, thence it proceeds to depraved morals, thence to the most flagrant iniquities, these are the grades. But what with themselves said they, thinking not rightly? A small thing and with tediousness is our life. Wisdom 2:1 From this evil belief follows that which also the Apostle has spoken of, Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die. 1 Corinthians 15:32 But in the former passage more diffusely luxury itself is described: Let us crown us with roses, before they be withered; in every place let us leave the tokens of our gladness. Wisdom 2:8-9 After the more diffuse description of that luxury, what follows? Let us slay the poor just man: Wisdom 2:10 this is therefore saying, He is not God. Soft words they seemed but now to say: Let us crown us with roses, before they be withered. What more delicate, what more soft? Would you expect, out of this softness, Crosses, swords? Wonder not, soft are even the roots of brambles; if any one handle them, he is not pricked: but that wherewith you shall be pricked from thence has birth. Corrupted, therefore, are those men, and abominable have become in their iniquities. They say, If Son of God He is, let Him come down from the Cross. Matthew 27:40 Behold them openly saying, He is not God....

4. The Lord from Heaven has looked forth upon the sons of men, that He might see if there is one understanding and seeking after God Psalm 52:3. What is this? Corrupted they are, all these that say, There is no God? And what? Did it escape God, that they had become such? Or indeed to us would their

inward thought be opened, except by Him it were told? If then He understood, if then He knew, what is this which has been said, that He might see? For the words are of one inquiring, of one not knowing. God from Heaven has looked forth, etc. And as though He had found what He sought by looking upon, and by looking down from Heaven, He gives sentence: All men have gone aside, together useless they have become: there is not one that does good, not so much as one Psalm 52:4. Two questions arise somewhat difficult: for if God looks out from Heaven, in order that He may see if there is one understanding or seeking after God; there steals upon an unwise man the thought, that God knows not all things. This is one question: what is the other? If there is not one that does good, is not so much as one; who is he that travails amid bad men? The former question then is solved as follows: oftentimes the Scripture speaks in such manner, that what by the gift of God a creature does, God is said to do...For hence has been said the following also, For the Spirit searches all things, even the depth of God; 1 Corinthians 2:10 not because He that knows all things searches, but because to you has been given the Spirit, which makes you also to search: and that which by His own gift you do, He is said to do; because without Him you would not do it: therefore God is said to do, when you do. And because this by the gift of God you doest, God from heaven is looking forth upon the sons of men. The former question then, according to our measure, thus has been solved.

5. What is that which looking forth we acknowledge? What is that which looking forth God acknowledges? What (because here He gives it) does He acknowledge? Hear what it is; that All have gone aside, together useless they have become: there is not one that does good, there is not so much as one. What then is that other question, but the same whereof a little before I have made mention? If, There is not one that does good, is not so much as one, no one remains to groan amid evil men. Stay, says the Lord, do not hastily give judgment. I have given to men to do well; but of Me, He says, not of themselves: for of themselves evil they are: sons of men they are, when they do evil; when well, My sons. For this thing God does, out of sons of men He makes sons of God: because out of Son of God He has made Son of Man. See what this participation is: there has been promised to us a participation of Divinity: He lies that has promised, if He is not first made partaker of mortality. For the Son of God has been made partaker of mortality, in order that mortal man may be made partaker of divinity. He that has promised that His good is to be shared with you, first with you has shared your evil: He that to you has promised divinity, shows in you love. Therefore take away that men are sons of God, there remains that they are sons of men: There is none that does good, is not so much as one.

6. Shall not all know that work iniquity, that devour My people for the food of bread? Psalm 52:5....There is therefore here a people of God that is being devoured. Nay, There is not one that does good, there is not so much as one. We reply by the rule above. But this people that is devoured, this people that suffers evil men, this that groans and travails amid evil men, now out of sons of men have been made sons of God: therefore are they devoured. For, The counsel of the needy man you have confounded, because the Lord is his hope. For oftentimes, in order that the people of God may be devoured, this very thing in it is despised, that it is the people of God. I will pillage, he says, and despoil; if he is a Christian, what will he do to me?...But what follows? I will convince you, and will set you before your face. You will not now know so as you should be displeasing to yourself, you shall know so as you may mourn. For God cannot but show to the unrighteous their iniquity. If He is not to show, who will they be that are to say, What has profited us pride, and what has boasting of riches bestowed upon us? Wisdom 5:8 For then shall they know, that now will not know. Shall not all know? etc. Why has He added, for the food of bread? As it were as bread, they eat My people. For all other things which we eat, we can eat now these, now those; not always this vegetable, not always this flesh, not always these apples: but always bread. What is then, Devour My

people for the food of bread? Without intermission, without cessation they devour.

7. On God they have not called. He is comforting the man that groans, and chiefly by an admonition, lest by imitating evil men, who oftentimes prosper, they delight in evil doing. There is kept for you that which to you has been promised: their hope is present, yours is future, but theirs is transient, yours sure; theirs false, yours true. For they upon God have not called. Do not daily such men ask of God? They do not ask of God. Give heed, if I am able to say this by the aid of God Himself. God gratuitously will have Himself to be worshipped, gratuitously will have Himself to be loved, that is chastely to be loved; not Himself to be loved for the reason that He gives anything besides Himself, but because He gives Himself. He then that calls upon God in order that He may be made rich, on God does not call: for upon that He calls which to himself he wills to come....But now you would have coffer full, and conscience void: God fills not coffer, but breast. What do outward riches profit you, if inward need presses you? Therefore those men that for the sake of worldly comforts, that for the sake of earthly good things, that for the sake of present life and earthly felicity, call upon God, do not call upon God.

8. For this reason what follows concerning them? There have they feared with fear, where there was no fear Psalm 52:6. For is there fear, if a man lose riches? There is no fear there, and yet in that case men are afraid. But if a man lose wisdom, truly there is fear, and in that case he is not afraid....You have feared to give back money, and hast willed to lose fidelity. The Martyrs took not away property of other persons, but even their own they despised that they might not lose fidelity: and it was too little to lose money, when they were proscribed; they took also their life when they suffered: they lost life, in order that unto everlasting life they might find it.

Matthew 10:39 Therefore there they feared, where they ought to have been afraid. But they that of Christ have said, He is not God, have there feared where was no fear. For they said, If we shall have let Him go, there will come the Romans, and will take away from us both place and kingdom. John 11:48 O folly and imprudence saying in its heart, He is not God! You have feared to lose earth, you have lost Heaven: you have feared lest there should come the Romans, and take away from you place and kingdom!

Could they take away from you God? What then remains? What but that thou confess, that you have willed to keep, and by keeping ill hast lost? For you have lost both place and nation by slaying Christ. For you did will rather to slay Christ, than to lose place; and you have lost place, and nation, and Christ. In fearing, they have slain Christ: but wherefore this? For God has scattered the bones of them that please men. Willing to please men, they feared to lose their place. But Christ Himself, of whom they said, He is not God, willed rather to displease such men, as they were: sons of men, not sons of God, He willed rather to displease.

Thence were scattered their bones, His bones no one has broken. They were confounded, for God has despised them. In very deed, brethren, as far as regards them, great confusion has come to them. In the place where they crucified the Lord, whom for this cause they crucified, that they might not lose both place and nation, the Jews are not. God, therefore, has despised them: and yet in despising He warned them to be converted. Let them now confess Christ, and say, He is God, of whom they said, He is not God.

Let them return to the inheritance of their fathers, to the inheritance of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, let them possess with these very persons life eternal: though they have lost life temporal. Wherefore this? Because out of sons of men have been made sons of God. For so long as they remain, and will not, there is not one that does good, there is not so much as one. They were confounded, for God has despised

them. And as though to these very persons He were turned, He says, Who shall give out of Sion salvation to Israel?

Psalm 52:7. O you fools, you revile, insult, buffet, besmear with spittings, with thorns ye crown, upon the Cross ye lift up; whom? Who shall give out of Sion salvation to Israel? Shall not That Same of whom you have said, He is not God? In God's turning away the captivity of His people. For there turns away the captivity of His people, no one but He that has willed to be a captive in your own hands. But what men shall understand this thing? Jacob shall exult, and Israel shall rejoice. Israel; the true Jacob, and the true Israel, that younger, to whom the elder was servant, Genesis 25:23 shall himself exult, for he shall himself understand.

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