

Exposition on Psalm 84

by St. Augustine

The sermon explores the spiritual meaning of the winepresses, which is the process of stripping away carnal desires and making room for the new man, and the blessed state of possessing the heavenly Jerusalem and praising God forever.

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Tribulation And Hope"

Description

St. Augustine preaches about the spiritual significance of the winepresses mentioned in Psalms, comparing the pressing of grapes and olives to the tribulations and trials believers face in the Church. He emphasizes the transformation believers undergo through tribulations, shedding off carnal desires and becoming vessels for God's work. Augustine encourages believers to seek rest in God, to endure tribulations with hope, and to long for the eternal courts of the Lord. He highlights the importance of humility, choosing to be in the house of the Lord, and trusting in God's mercy and truth to receive grace and glory.

Transcript

1. This Psalm is entitled, For the winepresses. And, as you observed with me, my beloved (for I saw that you attended most closely), nothing is said in its text either of any press, or wine-basket, or vat, or of any of the instruments or the building of a winepress; nothing of this kind did we hear read; so that it is no easy question what is the meaning of this title inscribed upon it, for the winepresses. For certainly, if after the title it mentioned anything about such things as I enumerated, carnal persons might have believed that it was a song concerning those visible wine-presses; but as it has this title, yet says nothing afterwards of those winepresses which we know so well, I cannot doubt that there are other wine-presses, which the Spirit of God intended us to look for and to understand here. Therefore, let us recall to mind what takes place in these visible winepresses, and see how this takes place spiritually in the Church. The grape hangs on the vines, and the olive on its trees. For it is for these two fruits that presses are usually made ready; and as long as they hang on their boughs, they seem to enjoy free air; and neither is the grape wine, nor the olive oil, before they are pressed. Thus it is with men whom God predestined before the world to be conformed to the image of His only-begotten Son, Romans 8:29 who has been first and especially pressed in His Passion, as the great Cluster. Men of this kind, therefore, before they draw near to the service of God, enjoy in the world a kind of delicious liberty, like hanging grapes or olives: but as it is said, My son, when you draw near to the service of God, stand in judgment and fear, and make your soul ready for temptation: Sirach 2:1 so each, as he draws near to the service of God, finds that he has come

to the winepress; he shall undergo tribulation, shall be crushed, shall be pressed, not that he may perish in this world, but that he may flow down into the storehouses of God. He has the coverings of carnal desires stripped off from him, like grape-skins: for this has taken place in him in carnal desires, of which the Apostle speaks, Put ye off the old man, and put on the new man. All this is not done but by pressure: therefore the Churches of God of this time are called winepresses.

2. But who are we who are placed in the wine-presses? Sons of Core. For this follows: For the winepresses, to the sons of Core. The sons of Core has been explained, sons of the bald: as far as those could explain it to us, who know that language, according to their service due to God.. ..

3. But being placed under pressure, we are crushed for this purpose, that for our love by which we were borne towards those worldly, secular, temporal, unstable, and perishable things, having suffered in them, in this life, torments, and tribulations of pressures, and abundance of temptations, we may begin to seek that rest which is not of this life, nor of this earth; and the Lord becomes, as is written, a refuge for the poor man. What is, for the poor man? For him who is, as it were, destitute, without aid, without help, without anything on which he may rest, in earth. For to such poor men, God is present. For though men abound in money on earth,...they are filled more with fear than with enjoyment. For what is so uncertain as a rolling thing? It is not unfitly that money itself is stamped round, because it remains not still. Such men, therefore, though they have something, are yet poor. But those who have none of this wealth, but only desire it, are counted also among rich men who will be rejected; for God takes account not of power, but of will. The poor then are destitute of all this world's substance, for even though it abounds around them, they know how fleeting it is; and crying unto God, having nothing in this world with which they may delight themselves, and be held down, placed in abundant pressures and temptations, as if in winepresses, they flow down, having become oil or wine. What are these latter but good desires? For God remains their only object of desire; now they love not earth. For they love Him who made heaven and earth; they love Him, and are not yet with Him. Their desire is delayed, in order that it may increase; it increases, in order that it may receive. For it is not any little thing that God will give to him who desires, nor does he need to be little exercised to be made fit to receive so great a good: not anything which He has made will God give, but Himself who made all things. Exercise yourself to receive God: that which you shall have for ever, desire thou for a long time....

4. Wherefore, most beloved, as each can, make vows, and perform to the Lord God what each can: let no one look back, no one delight himself with his former interests, no one turn away from that which is before to that which is behind: let him run until he arrive: for we run not with the feet but with the desire. But let no one in this life say that he has arrived. For who can be so perfect as Paul? Philippians 3:13 Yet he says, Brethren, I count not myself to have attained.

5. If therefore you feel the passions of this world, even when you are happy, you understand now that you are in the winepress....If therefore the world smile upon you with happiness, imagine yourself in the winepress, and say, I found trouble and heaviness, and I did call upon the name of the Lord. He said not, I found trouble, without meaning, of such a kind as was hidden: for some troubles are hidden from some in this world, who think they are happy while they are absent from God. For as long as we are in the body, he says, we are absent from the Lord. 2 Corinthians 5:6 If you were absent from your father, you would be unhappy: are you absent from the Lord, and happy? There are then some who think it is well with them. But those who understand, that in whatever abundance of wealth and pleasures, though all things obey their beck, though nothing troublesome creep in, nothing adverse terrify, yet that they are in a bad case as long as they are absent from the Lord; with a most keen eye these have found trouble, and grief, and have

called on the name of the Lord. Such is he who sings in this Psalm. Who is he? The Body of Christ. Who is that? You, if you will: all we, if we will: for Christ's Body is one....

How lovely are Your tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts Psalm 83:1. He was in some tabernacles, that is, in winepresses: but he longed for other tabernacles, where is no pressure: in this he sighed for them, from these, he, as it were, flowed down into them by the channel of longing desire.

6. And what follows? My soul longs and fails for the courts of the Lord Psalm 83:2. It is not enough that it longs and fails: for what does it fail? For the courts of the Lord. The grape when pressed has failed: but for what? So as to be changed into wine, and to flow into the vat, and into the rest of the storeroom, to be kept there in great quiet. Here it is longed for, there it is received: here are sighs, there joy: here prayers, there praises: here groans, there rejoicing. Those things which I mentioned, let no one while here turn from ashamed: let no one be unwilling to suffer. There is danger, lest the grape, while it fears the winepress, should be devoured by birds or by wild beasts....

7. You have heard a groan in the winepress, My soul longs and fails for the courts of the Lord: hear how it holds out, rejoicing in hope: My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God. Here they have rejoiced for that cause. Whence comes rejoicing, but of hope? Wherefore have they rejoiced? In the living God. What has rejoiced in you? My heart and my flesh. Why have they rejoiced? For, says he, the sparrow has found her a house, and the turtle-dove a nest, where she may lay her young Psalm 83:3. What is this? He had named two things, and he adds two figures of birds which answer to them: he had said that his heart rejoiced and his flesh, and to these two he made the sparrow and turtle-dove to correspond: the heart as the sparrow, the flesh as the dove. The sparrow has found herself a home: my heart has found itself a home. She tries her wings in the virtues of this life, in faith, and hope, and charity, by which she may fly unto her home: and when she shall have come there, she shall remain; and now the complaining voice of the sparrow, which is here, shall no longer be there. For it is the very complaining sparrow of whom in another Psalm he says, Like a sparrow alone on the housetop. From the housetop he flies home. Now let him be on the housetop, treading on his carnal house: he shall have a heavenly house, a perpetual home: that sparrow shall make an end of his complaints. But to the dove he has given young, that is, to the flesh: the dove has found a nest, where she may lay her young. The sparrow a home, the dove a nest, and a nest too where she may lay her young. A home is chosen as for ever, a nest is framed for a time: with the heart we think upon God, as if the sparrow flew to her home: with the flesh we do good works. For you see how many good works are done by the flesh of the saints; for by this we work the things we are commanded to work, by which we are helped in this life. Break your bread to the hungry, and bring the poor and roofless into your house; and if you see one naked, clothe him: Isaiah 58:7 and other such things which are commanded us we work only through the flesh....We speak, brethren, what ye know: how many seem to do good works without the Church? how many even Pagans feed the hungry, clothe the naked, receive the stranger, visit the sick, comfort the prisoner? How many do this? The dove seems, as it were, to bring forth young: but finds not herself a nest. How many works may heretics do not in the Church; they place not their young in a nest. They shall be trampled on and crushed: they shall not be kept, shall not be guarded....In that faith lay your young: in that nest work your works. For what the nests are, what that nest is, follows at once. Having said, And the dove has found herself a nest, where she may lay her young; as if you had asked, What nest? Your altars, O Lord of Hosts, my King and my God. What is, My King and my God? You who rules me, who has created me.

8. ...Blessed are those who dwell in Your house Psalm 83:4....If you have your own house, you are poor; if God's, you are rich. In your own house you will fear robbers; of the house of God, He is Himself the wall.

Therefore blessed are those who dwell in Your house. They possess the heavenly Jerusalem, without constraint, without pressure, without difference and division of boundaries; all have it, and each have all. Great are those riches. Brother crowds not brother: there is no want there.

Next, what will they do there? For among men it is necessity which is the mother of all employments. I have already said, in brief, brethren, run in your mind through any occupations, and see if it is not necessity alone which produces them. Those very eminent arts which seem so powerful in giving help to others, the art of speaking in their defence or of medicine in healing, for these are the most excellent employments in this life; take away litigants, who is there for the advocate to help?

Take away wounds and diseases? What is there for the physician to cure? And all those employments of ours which are required and done for our daily life, arise from necessity. To plough, to sow, to clear fallow ground, to sail; what is it which produces all these works, but necessity and want? Take away hunger, thirst, nakedness; who has need of all these things?...For instance, the injunction, Break your bread to the hungry. For whom could you break bread, if there were nobody hungry?

Take in the roofless poor into your house. Isaiah 58:7 What stranger is there to take in, where all live in their own country? What sick person to visit, where they enjoy perpetual health? What litigants to reconcile, where there is everlasting peace? What dead to bury, where there is eternal life? None of those honourable actions which are common to all men will then be your employment, nor any of these good works; the young swallows will then fly out of their nest. What then?

You have said already what we shall have; Those who dwell in Your house are blessed. Say now what they shall do, for I see not then any need to induce me to action. Even what I am now saying and arguing springs from some need. Will there be any such argument there to teach the ignorant, or remind the forgetful? Or will the Gospel be read in that country where the Word of God Itself shall be contemplated?...They shall be always praising You. This shall be our whole duty, an unceasing Hallelujah.

Think not, my brethren, that there will be any weariness there: if you are not able to endure long here in saying this, it is because some want draws you away from that enjoyment. If what is not seen gives not so much joy here, if with so much eagerness under the pressure and weakness of the flesh we praise that which we believe, how shall we praise that which we see? When death shall be swallowed up in victory, when this mortal shall have put on immortality, 1 Corinthians 15:54 no one will say, I have been standing a long time; no one will say, I have fasted a long time, I have watched a long time.

For there shall be great endurance, and our immortal bodies shall be sustained in contemplation of God. And if the word which we now dispense to you keeps your weak flesh standing so long, what will be the effect of that joy? How will it change us? For we shall be like Him, since we shall see Him as He is. 1 John 3:2 Being made like Him, when shall we ever faint? What shall draw us off? Brethren, we shall never be satiated with the praise of God, with the love of God. If love could fail, praise could fail. But if love be eternal, as there will there be beauty inexhaustible, fear not lest you be not able to praise for ever Him whom you shall be able to love for ever. For this life let us sigh.

9. But how shall we come there? Happy is the man whose strength is in You Psalm 83:5. He knew where he was, and that by reason of the frailty of his flesh he could not fly to that state of blessedness: he thought upon his own burden, as it is said elsewhere; For the corruptible body weighs down the soul, and the earthly house depresses the understanding which has many thoughts. Wisdom 9:15 The Spirit calls upward, the weight of the flesh calls back again downward: between the double effort to raise and to

weigh down, a kind of struggle ensues: this struggle goes toward the pressure of the winepress. Hear how the Apostle describes this same struggle of the winepress, for he was himself afflicted there, there he was pressed....Miserable man that I am: who shall deliver me from the body of this death? The grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 7:24-25 ...For I delight in the Law of God according to the inner man. But what shall I do? How shall I fly? How shall I arrive there? I see another law in my members, etc....And as in the words of the Apostle, that difficulty and that almost inextricable struggle is alleviated by the addition, The grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord; so here, when he sighed in the ardent longing for the house of God, and those praises of God, and when a kind of despair arose at the feeling of the burden of the body and the weight of the flesh, again he awoke to hope, and said Psalm 83:5, Blessed is the man whose taking up is in You.

10. What then does God supply by His grace to him whom He takes hold of to lead him on? He goes on to say: He has placed steps in his heart....Where does it place steps? In his heart, in the valley of weeping Psalm 83:6. So here you have for a winepress the valley of weeping, the very pious tears in tribulation are the new wine of those that love....They went forth weeping, he says, casting their seed. Therefore, by the grace of God may upward steps be placed in your heart. Rise by loving.

Hence the Psalm of degrees is called....He has placed steps of ascent to the place which He has appointed Psalm 83:7. Now we lament; whence proceed our lamentations, but from that place where the steps of our ascent are placed? Whence comes our lamentation, but from that cause wherefore the Apostle exclaimed that he was a wretched man, because he saw another law in his members, warring against the law in his mind? Romans 7:23 And whence does this proceed? From the penalty of sin.

And we thought that we could easily be righteous as it were by our own strength, before we received the command; but when the command came, sin revived; but I died, Romans 7:9 says the Apostle. For a law was given to men, not such as could save them at once, but it was to show them in what severe sickness they were lying....But when sin was made manifest by the law given, sin was but increased, for it is both sin, and against the Law; Sin, says he, taking occasion by the command, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence.

Romans 7:8 What does he mean by taking occasion by the law? Having received the command, men tried as by their own strength to obey it; conquered by lust, they became guilty of transgression of this very command also. But what says the Apostle? Where sin abounded, grace has much more abounded; Romans 5:20 that is, the disease increased, the medicine became of more avail. Accordingly, my brethren, did those five porches of Solomon, in the middle of which the pool lay, heal the sick at all?

The sick, says the Evangelist, lay in the five porches. John 5:3 In the Gospel we have and read it. Those five porches are the law in the five books of Moses. For this cause the sick were brought forth from their houses that they might lie in the porches. So the law brought the sick men forth, but did not heal them: but by the blessing of God the water was disturbed, as by an Angel descending into it. At the sight of the water troubled, the one person who was able, descended and was healed.

That water surrounded by the five porches, was the people of the Jews shut up in their law. The Lord came and disturbed this people, so that He Himself was slain. For if the Lord had not troubled the Jews by coming down to them, would He have been crucified? So that the troubled water signified the Passion of the Lord, which arose from His troubling the Jewish people. The sick man who believes in this Passion, like him who descended into the troubled water, is healed thereby. He whom the Law could not heal, that

is, while he lay in the porches, is healed by grace, by faith in the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ....

11. He shall give blessing, says he, who gave the law....Grace shall come after the law, grace itself is the blessing. And what has that grace and blessing given unto us? They shall go from virtue to virtue. For here by grace many virtues are given. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith, to another the gift of healing, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues, to another prophecy. 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 Many virtues, but necessary for this life; and from these virtues we go on to a virtue. To what virtue? To Christ the Virtue of God and the Wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 1:24 He gives different virtues in this place, who for all the virtues which are necessary and useful in this valley of weeping shall give one virtue, Himself. For in Scripture and in many writers four virtues are described useful for life: prudence, by which we discern between good and evil; justice, by which we give each person his due, owing no man anything, Romans 13:8 but loving all men: temperance, by which we restrain lusts; fortitude, by which we bear all troubles. These virtues are now by the grace of God given unto us in the valley of weeping: from these virtues we mount unto that other virtue. And what will that be, but the virtue of the contemplation of God alone?...It follows in that place: They shall go from virtue to virtue. What virtue? That of contemplation. What is contemplation? The God of Gods shall appear in Sion. The God of Gods, Christ of the Christians....When all is finished, that mortality makes necessary, He shall appear to the pure in heart, as He is, God with God, The Word with the Father, by which all things were made.

12. And again, from the thought of those joys he returns to his own sighs. He sees what has come before in hope, and where he is in reality....Therefore returning to the groans proper to this place, he says, O Lord God of virtues, hear my prayer: hearken, O God of Jacob Psalm 83:8: for Jacob himself also You have made Israel out of Jacob. For God appeared unto him, and he was called Israel, Genesis 32:28 seeing God. Hear me therefore, O God of Jacob, and make me Israel. When shall I become Israel? When the God of Gods shall appear in Sion.

13. Behold, O God our defender. And look on the face of Your Christ Psalm 83:9. For when does God not look upon the face of His Christ? What is this, Look on the face of Your Christ? By the face we are known. What is it then, Look on the face of Your Christ? Cause Your Christ to become known to all. Look on the face of Your Christ: let Christ become known to all, that we may be able to go from strength to strength, that grace may abound, since sin has abounded.

14. For one day in Your courts is better than a thousand Psalm 83:10. Those courts they were for which he sighed, for which he fainted. My soul longs and fails for the courts of the Lord: one day there is better than a thousand days. Men long for thousands of days, and wish to live here long: let them despise these thousands of days, let them long for one day, which has neither rising nor setting: one day, an everlasting day, to which no yesterday yields, which no tomorrow presses. Let this one day be longed for by us. What have we to do with a thousand days? We go from the thousand days to one day; let us hasten to that one day, as we go from strength to strength.

15. I have chosen to be cast away in the house of the Lord, rather than to dwell in the tents of sinners Psalm 83:11. For he found the valley of weeping, he found humility by which he might rise: he knows that if he would raise himself he shall fall, if he humble himself he shall be exalted: he has chosen to be cast away, that he may be raised up. How many beside this tabernacle of the Lord's winepress, that is beside the Catholic Church, wishing to be lifted up, and loving their honours, refuse to see the truth. If this verse had been in their heart, would they not cast away honours, and run to the valley of weeping, and hence

find in their heart the way of ascent, and hence go from virtues to virtue, placing their hope in Christ, not in some man or another? A good word is this, a word to rejoice in, a word to be chosen. He himself chose to be cast away in the house of the Lord; but He who invited him to the feast, when he chose a lower place calls him to a higher one, and says unto him, Go up higher. Luke 14:10 Yet he chose not but to be in the house of the Lord, in any part of it, so that he were not outside the threshold.

16. Wherefore did he choose?...Because God loves mercy and truth Psalm 83:12. The Lord loves mercy, by which He first came to my help: He loves truth, so as to give to him that believes what He has promised. Romans 11:29 Hear in the case of the Apostle Paul, His mercy and truth, Paul who was first Saul the persecutor. He needed mercy, and he has said that it was shown towards him: I who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, that in me Christ Jesus might show forth all longsuffering towards those who shall believe in Him unto life eternal. So that, when Paul received pardon of such great crimes, no one should despair of any sins whatever being forgiven him. Lo! You have Mercy....Lo, we see that Paul holds Him a debtor, having received mercy, demanding truth. The Lord, he says, shall give back in that day. What shall He give you back, but that which He owes you? How owes He unto you? What have you given Him? Who has first given unto Him, and it shall be restored to him again. Romans 11:29 The Lord Himself has made Himself a debtor, not by receiving, but by promising: it is not said unto Him, Restore what You have received: but, Restore what You have promised. He has shown mercy unto me, he says, that He might make me innocent: for before I was a blasphemer and injurious: but by His grace I have been made innocent. But He who first showed mercy, can He deny His debt? He loves mercy and truth. He will give grace and glory. What grace, but that of which the same one said: By the grace of God I am what I am? 1 Corinthians 15:10 What glory, but that of which he said, There is laid up for me a crown of glory? 2 Timothy 4:8

17. Therefore the Lord will not withhold good from those who walk in innocence Psalm 83:12. Why then, O men, are you unwilling to keep innocence, except in order that you may have good things?...You see wealth in the hands of robbers, of the impious, the wicked, the base; in the hands of scandalous and criminal men you see wealth: God gives them these things on account of their fellowship in the human race, for the abundant overflowing of His goodness: who also makes His sun to rise upon the good and the evil, and causes it to rain upon the righteous and upon the sinners. Matthew 5:45 Gives He so much to the wicked, and keeps nothing for you? He keeps something: be at ease, He who had mercy on you when you were impious, does He desert you when you have become pious? He who gave to the sinner the free gift of His Son's death, what keeps He for the saved through that death? Therefore be at ease. Hold Him a debtor, for you have believed in Him promising. What then remains for us here, in the winepress, in affliction, in hardship, in our present dangerous life? What remains for us, that we may arrive there? O Lord God of virtues, blessed is the man that puts his hope in You.

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