

Exposition on Psalm 96

by St. Augustine

The house of God is being built through the declaration of God's honour, and we are called to worship the Lord and bring presents to Him.

Scripture: Psalm 95:1-95, Mark 13:27, John 15:12, 1 Corinthians 7:29

Topics: "Church Unity", "Redemption Through Christ"

Description

St. Augustine preaches about the building of God's house, symbolizing the Church, where believers are united in love and unity. He emphasizes the importance of singing a new song, representing love for one another as commanded by Jesus. The sermon highlights the redemption of all nations through Christ's sacrifice, the need for confession and humility before God, and the joy in worshipping the Lord in His holy court. St. Augustine also discusses the future judgment of the world based on righteousness and truth, urging believers to show mercy as they will be judged accordingly.

Transcript

1. My lord and brother Severus still defers the pleasure we shall feel in his discourse, which he owes us; for he acknowledges, that he is held a debtor. For all the Churches through which he has passed, by his tongue the lord has gladdened: much more therefore ought that Church to be rejoiced, out of which the Lord has propagated his preaching among the rest. But what shall we do, but obey his will? I said, however, brethren, that he deferred, not that he defrauded us. Therefore let us keep him as a debtor bound, and release him not until he has paid. Attend therefore, beloved: as far as the Lord allows, let us say somewhat of this Psalm, which indeed you already know; for the fresh mention of truth is sweet. Possibly when its title was pronounced, some heard it with wonder. For the Psalm is inscribed: When the house was being built after the Captivity. This title having been prefixed, you were perhaps expecting in the text of the Psalm to hear what stones were hewn from the mountains, what masses were drawn to the spot, what foundations were laid, what beams were placed on high, what columns raised. Its song is of nothing of this kind....It is no such house that is in building; for behold where it is built, not in one spot, not in any particular region. For thus he begins:--

2. O sing unto the Lord a new song; sing unto the Lord, all the earth Psalm 95:1. If all the earth sings a new song, it is thus building while it sings: the very act of singing is building: but only, if it sings not the old song. The lust of the flesh sings the old song: the love of God sings the new....Hear why it is a new song: the Lord says, A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another. John 15:12 The whole

earth then sings a new song: there the house of God is built. All the earth is the house of God. If all the earth is the house of God, he who clings not to all the earth, is a ruin, not a house; that old ruin whose shadow that ancient temple represented. For there what was old was destroyed, that what was new might be built up....The Apostle binds us together into this very structure, and fastens us when bound together in that unity, saying, Forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:2-3 Where there is this unity of Spirit, there is one stone; but one stone formed out of many. How one formed out of many? By forbearing one another in love. Therefore the house of the Lord our God is in building; it is this that is being wrought, for this are these words, for this these readings, for this the preaching of the Gospel over the whole world; as yet it is in building. This house has increased greatly, and filled many nations: nevertheless, it has not yet prevailed through all nations: by its increase it has held many, and will prevail over all: and it is gainsaid by those who boast of their being of its household, and who say, it has already lost ground. It still increases, still all those nations which have not yet believed are destined to believe; that no man may say, will that tongue believe? will the barbarians believe? What is the meaning of the Holy Spirit having appeared in the fiery tongues, Acts 2:3 except that there is no tongue so hard that it cannot be softened by that fire? For we know that many barbarous nations have already believed in Christ: Christ already possesses regions where the Roman empire has never yet reached; what is as yet closed to those who fight with the sword, is not closed to Him who fights with wood. For the Lord has reigned from the wood. Who is it who fights with wood? Christ. With His cross He has vanquished kings, and fixed upon their forehead, when vanquished, that very cross; and they glory in it, for in it is their salvation. This is the work which is being wrought, thus the house increases, thus it is building: and that you may know, hear the following verses of the Psalm: see them labouring upon, and constructing the house. O sing unto the Lord all the earth.

3. Sing unto the Lord, bless His Name: be telling good tidings of His salvation from day to day Psalm 95:2. How does the building increase? Be telling, he says, good tidings of His salvation from day to day. Let it be preached from day to day; from day to day, he says, let it be built; let My house, says God, increase. And as if it were said by the workmen, Where dost Thou command it to be built? Where do You will Your house to increase? Choose for us some level, spacious spot, if Thou wish an ample house built You. Where dost Thou bid us be telling good tidings from day to day? He shows the place: Declare His honour unto the heathen: His honour, not yours. O you builders, Declare His honour unto the heathen. Should ye choose to declare your own honour, you shall fall: if His, you shall be built up, while you are building. Therefore they who choose to declare their own honour, have refused to dwell in that house; and therefore they sing not a new song with all the earth. For they do not share it with the whole round world; and hence they are not building in the house, but have erected a whited wall. How sternly does God threaten the whited wall? Ezekiel 13:10 There are innumerable testimonies of the Prophets, whence He curses the whited wall. What is the whited wall, save hypocrisy, that is, pretence? Without it is bright, within it is dirt....A certain person, speaking of this whited wall, said thus: as, if in a wall which stands alone, and is not connected with any other walls, you make a door, whoever enters, is out of doors; so in that part which has refused to sing the new song together with the house, but has chosen to build a wall, and that a whited one, and not solid, what avails it that it has a door? If you enter, you are found to be without. For because they themselves did not enter by the door, their door also does not admit them within. For the Lord says, I am the door: by Me they enter in. John 10:9 ...Declare His honour unto the heathen. What is, unto the heathen? Perhaps by nations but a few are meant: and that part which has raised the whited wall has still somewhat to say: why are not Getulia, Numidia, Mauritania, Byzacium, nations? Provinces are nations. Let the word of God take the word from hypocrisy, from the whited wall, building up the house over the whole world. It is not enough to say, Declare His honour unto the heathen; that you may not think any

nations excepted, he adds, and His wonders unto all people.

4. For the Lord is great, and cannot worthily be praised Psalm 95:4. What Lord, except Jesus Christ, is great, and cannot worthily be praised? You know surely that He appeared as a Man: ye know surely that He was conceived in a woman's womb, you know that He was born from the womb, that He was suckled, that He was carried in arms, circumcised, that a victim was offered for Him, that He grew; lastly, you know that He was buffeted, spit upon, crowned with thorns, was crucified, died, was pierced with a spear; ye know that He suffered all these things: He is great, and cannot worthily be praised. Despise not what is little, understand what is great. He became little, because you were such: let Him be acknowledged great, and in Him you shall be great....For what can a small tongue say towards the praise of the Great One? By saying, Beyond praise, he has spoken, and has given to imagination what it may conceive: as if saying, What I cannot utter, do thou reflect on; and when you shall have reflected, it will not be enough. What no man's thought utters, does any man's tongue utter? The Lord is great, and cannot worthily be praised. Let Him be praised, and preached: His honour declared, and His house built.

5. ...For the spot where he wished to build the house, is itself woody, where it was said yesterday, we found it in the wood. For he was seeking that very house, when he said, in the wood. And why is that spot woody? Men used to worship images: it is not wonderful that they fed hogs. For that son who left his father, and spent his all on harlots, living as a prodigal, used to feed hogs, Luke 15:12-15 that is, to worship devils; and by this very superstition of the heathen, all the earth became a wood. But he who builds a house, roots up the wood; and for this reason it was said, While the house was being built, after the captivity. For men were held captive under the devil, and served devils; but they were redeemed from captivity. They could sell, but they could not redeem themselves. The Redeemer came, and gave a price; He poured forth His Blood, and bought the whole world. You ask what He bought? You see what He has given; find out then what He bought. The Blood of Christ was the price. What is equal to this? What, but the whole world? What, but all nations? They are very ungrateful for their price, or very proud, who say that the price is so small that it bought the Africans only; or that they are so great, as that it was given for them alone. Let them not then exult, let them not be proud: He gave what He gave for the whole world. He knew what He bought, because He knew at what price He bought it. Thus because we are redeemed, the house is built after the captivity. And who are they who held us in captivity? Because they to whom it is said, Declare His honour, are the clearers of the wood: that they may root out the wood, free the earth from captivity, and build, and raise up, by declaring the greatness of the Lord's house. How is the wood of devils cleared away, unless He who is above them all be preached? All nations then had devils for their gods: those whom they called gods, were devils, as the Apostle more openly says, The things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice unto devils, and not to God. 1 Corinthians 10:20 Since therefore they were in captivity, because they sacrificed to devils, and on that account the whole earth had remained woody; He is declared to be great, and above all worldly praise.

6. ...For when he had said, He is more to be feared than all gods: he added, As for all the gods of the heathen, they are devils....Because all the gods of the heathen are devils. And is this all the praise of Him who cannot worthily be praised, that He is above all the gods of the heathen, which are devils? Wait, and hear what follows: It is the Lord that made the heavens. Not above all gods only therefore, but above all the heavens which He made, is the Lord. If he were to say, above all gods, for the gods of the heathen are devils, and if the praise of our Lord stopped here, he had said less than we are accustomed to think of Christ; but when he said, But it is the Lord that made the heavens; see what difference there is between the heavens and devils: and what between the heavens and Him who made the heavens; behold how

exalted is the Lord. He said not, But the Lord sits above the heavens; for perhaps some one else might be imagined to have made them, upon which He was enthroned: but, It is the Lord that made the heavens. If He made the heavens, He made the Angels also: Himself made the Angels, Himself made the Apostles. The devils yielded to the Apostles: but the Apostles themselves were heavens, who bore the Lord...O heavens, which He made, declare His honour unto the heathen! Let His house be built throughout the earth, let all the earth sing a new song.

7. Confession and beauty are before Him Psalm 95:6. Do you love beauty? Wishest thou to be beautiful? Confess! He said not, beauty and confession, but confession and beauty. You were foul; confess, that you may be fair: you were a sinner; confess, that you may be righteous. You could deform yourself: you can not make yourself beautiful. But of what sort is our Betrothed, who has loved one deformed, that he might make her fair? How, says some one, loved He one deformed? I came not, said He, to call the righteous, but sinners. Matthew 9:13 Whom callest Thou? sinners, that they may remain sinners? No, says He. And by what means will they cease to be sinners? Confession and beauty are before Him. They honour Him by confession of their sins, they vomit the evils which they had greedily devoured; they return not to their vomit, like the unclean dog; 2 Peter 2:22 and there will then be confession and beauty: we love beauty; let us first choose confession, that beauty may follow. Again, there is one who loves power and greatness: he wishes to be great as the Angels are. There is a certain greatness in the Angels; and such power, that if the Angels exert it to the full, it cannot be withstood. And every man desires the power of the Angels, but their righteousness every man loves not. First love righteousness, and power shall follow you. For what follows here? Holiness and greatness are in His sanctification. You were before seeking for greatness: first love righteousness: when you are righteous, you shall also be great. For if you preposterously dost wish first to be great, you fall before you can rise: for thou dost not rise, you are raised up. Thou risest better, if He raise you who falls not. For He who falls not descends unto you: you had fallen: He descends, He has stretched forth His hand unto you; you can not rise by your own strength, embrace the hand of Him who descends, that you may be raised up by the Strong One.

8. What then? If confession and beauty are before Him: holiness and greatness in His sanctification Psalm 95:7. This we declare, when we are building the house; behold, it is already declared unto the heathen; what ought the heathen to do, to whom those who have cleared away the wood have declared the Lord's honour? He now says to the heathen themselves, Ascribe unto the Lord, O you kindreds of the people: ascribe unto the Lord worship and honour. Ascribe them not unto yourselves: because they also who have declared it unto you, have not declared their own, but His honour. Do ye then ascribe unto the Lord worship and honour; and say, Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us: but unto Your Name give the praise. Put not your trust in man. If each of you is baptized, let him say: He baptizes me, of whom the friend of the Bridegroom said, He baptizes with the Holy Ghost. For when you say this, you ascribe unto the Lord worship and honour: Ascribe unto the Lord worship and honour.

9. Ascribe unto the Lord glory unto His Name Psalm 95:8. Not unto the name of man, not unto your own name, but unto His ascribe worship....Confession is a present unto God. O heathen, if you will enter into His courts, enter not empty. Bring presents. What presents shall we bring with us? The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, shall not Thou despise. Enter with an humble heart into the house of God, and you have entered with a present. But if you are proud, you enter empty. For whence would you be proud, if you were not empty? For if you were full, you would not be puffed up. How couldest thou be full? If you were to bring a present, which you should carry to the courts of the Lord. Let us not retain you much longer: let us run over what remains. Behold the house increasing: behold the

edifice pervade the whole world. Rejoice, because you have entered into the courts; rejoice, because you are being built into the temple of God. For those who enter are themselves built up, they themselves are the house of God: He is the inhabitor, for whom the house is built over the whole world, and this after the captivity. Bring presents, and come into His courts.

10. O worship the Lord in His holy court Psalm 95:9: in the Catholic Church; this is His holy court. Let no man say, Lo, here is Christ, or there. For there shall arise false prophets. Matthew 24:23-24 Say this unto them, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. You are calling me to the whited wall; I adore my God in His holy court. Let the whole earth be moved before His face.

11. Tell it out among the nations, that the Lord reigns from the wood: and that it is He who has made the round world so fast that it cannot be moved Psalm 95:10. What testimonies of the building of the house of God! The clouds of heaven thunder out throughout the world that God's house is being built; and the frogs cry from the marsh, We alone are Christians. What testimonies do I bring forward? That of the Psalter. I bring forward what you sing as one deaf: open your ears; you sing this; you sing with me, and you agree not with me; your tongue sounds what mine does, and yet your heart disagrees with mine. Do you not sing this? Behold the testimonies of the whole world: Let the whole earth be moved before His face: and do you say, that you are not moved? Tell it out among the heathen, that the Lord has reigned from the wood. Shall men perchance prevail here, and say they reign by wood, because they reign by means of the clubs of their bandits? Reign by the Cross of Christ, if you are to reign by wood. For this wood of yours makes you wooden: the wood of Christ passes you across the sea. You hear the Psalm saying, He has set aright the round world, that it cannot be moved; and you say it has not only been moved since it was made fast, but has also decreased. Do you speak the truth, and the Psalmist falsehood? Do the false prophets, when they cry out, Lo, here is Christ, and there, Matthew 24:23 speak truth; and does this Prophet lie? Brethren, against these most open words ye hear in the corners rumours like these; such an one was a traditor, and, such an one was a traditor. What do you say? Are your words, or the words of God, to be heard? For, it is He who has set aright the round world, that it cannot be moved. I show unto you the round world built: bring your present, and come into the courts of the Lord. You have no presents: and on that account you are not willing to enter. What is this? If God were to appoint unto you a bull, goat, or ram, for a present, you would find one to bring: He has appointed a humble heart, and you will not enter; for you find not this in yourself, because you are swollen with pride. He has set aright the round world, that it cannot be moved: and He shall judge the people righteously. Then shall they mourn, who now refuse to love righteousness.

12. Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad Psalm 95:11. Let the heavens, which declare the glory of God, rejoice; let the heavens rejoice, which the Lord made; let the earth be glad, which the heavens rain upon. For the heavens are the preachers, the earth the listeners. Let the sea be stirred up, and the fullness thereof. What sea? The world. The sea has been stirred up, and the fullness thereof: the whole world was roused up against the Church, while it was being extended and built over all the earth. Concerning this stirring up, you have heard in the Gospel, They shall deliver you up to councils. Mark 13:9 The sea was stirred up: but how should the sea ever conquer Him who made it?

13. The plains shall be joyful, and all things that are in them Psalm 95:12. All the meek, all the gentle, all the righteous, are the plains of God. Then shall all the trees of the woods rejoice. The trees of the woods are the heathen. Why do they rejoice? Because they were cut off from the wild olive, and engrafted into the good olive. Romans 11:17 Then shall all the trees of the woods rejoice: because huge cedars and cypresses have been cut down, and undecaying timbers have been bought for the building of the house.

They were trees of the woods; but before they were sent to the building: they were trees of the woods, but before they produced the olive.

14. Before the face of the Lord. For He comes, for He comes to judge the world Psalm 95:13. He came at first, and will come again. He first came in His Church in clouds. What are the clouds which bore Him? The Apostles who preached, respecting whom you have heard, when the Epistle was being read: We are ambassadors, he says, for Christ: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:20 These are the clouds in whom He comes, excepting His last Advent, when He will come to judge the quick and the dead. He came first in the clouds. This was His first voice which sounded forth in the Gospel: From this time shall they see the Son of Man coming in the clouds. Mark 13:26 What is, from this time? Will not the Lord come in later times, when all the tribes of the earth shall mourn? He first came in His own preachers, and filled the whole round world. Let us not resist His first coming, that we may not tremble at His second. But woe to them that are with child, and that give suck in those days! Mark 13:17 You have heard but now in the Gospel: Take ye heed, for you know not at what hour He comes. Mark 13:33 This is said figuratively. Who are those with child, and who give suck? Those who are with child, are the souls whose hope is in the world: but those who have gained what they hoped for, are meant by they who give suck. For example: one wishes to buy a country seat; he is with child, for his object is not gained as yet, the womb swells in hope: he buys it; he has brought forth, he now gives suck to what he has bought. Woe to them that are with child, and that give suck in those days! Woe to those who put their hope in the world; woe to them that cling to those things which they brought forth through hope in the world. What then should the Christian do? He should use, not serve, the world. 1 Corinthians 7:29-32 What is this? Those that have as those that have not...He who is without carefulness, waits without fear for his Lord's coming. For what sort of love is it of Christ, to fear lest He come? Brethren, are we not ashamed? We love Him, and yet we fear lest He come. Are we sure that we love Him? Or do we love our sins more? Therefore let us hate our sins for their own sake, and love Him who will come to punish our sins. He will come, whether we like or not: for because He comes not just now, it is no reason that He will not come at all. He will come, and when you know not; and if He shall find you ready, your ignorance is no hurt to you. Then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice before the Lord; for He comes: at His first coming. And what afterwards? For He comes to judge the earth. And all the trees of the woods shall rejoice. He came first: and later to judge the earth: He shall find those rejoicing who believed in His first coming, for He comes.

15. For with righteousness shall He judge the world: not a part of it, for He bought not a part: He will judge the whole, for it was the whole of which He paid the price. You have heard the Gospel, where it says, that when He comes, He shall gather together His elect from the four winds. Mark 13:27 He gathers all His elect from the four winds: therefore from the whole world. For Adam himself (this I had said before) signifies in Greek the whole world; for there are four letters, A, D, A, and M. But as the Greeks speak, the four quarters of the world have these initial letters, 'Ανατολ■, they call the East; Δ■σις, the West; Adam. Adam therefore has been scattered over the whole world. He was in one place, and fell, and as in a manner broken small, he filled the whole world: but the mercy of God gathered together the fragments from every side, and forged them by the fire of love, and made one what was broken. That Artist knew how to do this; let no one despair: it is indeed a great thing, but reflect who that Artist was. He who made, restored: He who formed, reformed. What are righteousness and truth? He will gather together His elect with Him to the judgment, but the rest He will separate one from another; for He will place some on the right, others on the left hand. But what is more just, what more true, than that they shall not expect mercy from their Judge, who have refused to act mercifully, before their Judge come? But those who chose to act with mercy, with mercy shall be judged....

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