

## Exposition of Psalm 83

### *A Sermon to the People*

#### *Verse 1. The wine presses and the children of Korah*

1. Over this psalm stands the title, *For the wine presses*. Beloved, we saw you listening with the utmost attention, yet in the text of the psalm neither you nor we heard any mention of a press-beam, or baskets, or a trough, or the utensils needed in a wine press, or the building in which the work is done. We heard nothing whatever of this sort of thing, so it is not easy to say what the title, *for the wine presses*, can mean. If some of the things I have enumerated did occur after the title, carnal-minded hearers would assuredly think that the psalm intended to sing about visible wine presses; but since although it was given the title, *for the wine presses*, nothing is said thereafter in any of its verses about the kind of wine presses with which our eyes are familiar, we can be in no doubt that the Spirit of God willed us to seek and discern in it some other wine presses. Accordingly let us call to mind what goes on in visible wine presses, and then consider how the same thing takes place spiritually in the Church.

Now it is for grapes and olives that presses are built. The cluster of grapes hangs on the vine and the olive on the tree, and as long as they hang there on their stalks they are free to enjoy the breeze; the grapes are not yet wine, nor the olives yet oil, before the pressing. So it is with men and women whom God predestined before time began to be conformed to the image of his only-begotten Son, who was in an unparalleled way the mighty grape, pressed out in his passion. Before such people enlist in God's service they enjoy delightful freedom in the world, like grapes or olives hanging there. But scripture warns us, *My son, when you enter God's service, stand fast in righteousness and reverence, and prepare your soul for trials* (Sir 2:1); and so any who approach God's service must know that they have come to the wine presses. They will be bruised, trampled and squeezed, not so that they may perish in this world but to ensure that they trickle down into God's storage vats. They are stripped of their vesture of fleshly desires as the fruit is denuded of its skin. The process of which the apostle speaks has taken effect in them as far as carnal desires are concerned: *Strip yourselves of the old self, and be clothed in the new* (Col 3:9-10). This happens only as a result of the pressing, which is why the churches of God today are called wine presses.

2. But who are we, who find ourselves in the wine presses? Children of Korah. This phrase is added to the title, which reads in full, *For the wine presses, for the sons of Korah*. As far as those who know the original language have been able to interpret it for us, in the course of the service they owed to God, we understand this to mean, "sons of a bald man." I am not going to shirk the effort of looking for a great mystery here, and finding it with you, as the Lord may enable us. Not all baldness is to be mocked, as it once was by a certain pestilential brood, and any who make fun of a baldness that is a sign of consecration may find themselves scattered by demons. Elisha was on his way when some silly boys yelled after him, *Baldy! Baldy!* (2 Kgs 2:23-24), and in order to enact a holy sign with full effect, Elisha turned to the Lord and begged that bears might break from the woods and devour them. Admittedly they were snatched away in their infancy, dispatched from life and from this world, and they died as children who would

otherwise not have died until they were old men; yes, but a terrifying sign was given to warn the rest of us. This was because Elisha stood as a type of someone else of whom we are sons and daughters, for we are children of Korah, which means of Jesus Christ our Lord. You will already have understood from the gospel, beloved, why a bald man was a figure of Christ. You remember that Christ was crucified at a place called Calvary.

So then, whether *sons of Korah* means what we have said, following early commentators, or something different which is perhaps hidden from us, you can see that what has already come to our notice is full of holy mystery. The sons of Korah are children of Christ, for he is the bridegroom who claims us as his children, saying, *The bridegroom's children cannot fast as long as the bridegroom is with them* (Mt 9:15). In short, these wine presses belong to Christians.

3. We are under pressure, and are being crushed for a purpose. Our love carried us away towards earthly, worldly, temporal goods, things that were fleeting and perishable, and we suffered the torments and troubles of the pressures they brought to bear on us in this life, and the overwhelming temptations; so now let us begin to seek that rest which is not afforded by this life or this earth. Then, as scripture says, the Lord becomes *a refuge for the poor* (Ps 9:10(9)). What does the psalm mean here by *the poor*? It means that God is a refuge for anyone who is destitute, helpless, without resources, without anything to rely on in this world. To those who are poor in this sense God is near, for such people look to what the apostle said, even while others wallow in this world's wealth: *Instruct the rich of this world not to be high-minded, nor to put their trust in unreliable wealth*, Paul told Timothy (1 Tm 6:17). These poor reflect how very uncertain was the life they enjoyed before they entered the service of God; before, that is, they stepped into the wine presses. They see that either those very riches gave rise to thoughts that pressed hard upon them as to how their wealth was to be administered, and how kept safe; or else, if they were even a little swayed towards greedy love of it, they were filled with fear rather than with enjoyment. What is as unreliable as something that rolls? And it is with good reason that money itself is coined in a rounded shape, because it will not stand still. Such people are poor, then, even if they have possessions. On the other hand, those who have none of these things, yet desire to have them, are reckoned with the rich who deserve to be rejected, for God looks not to our means, but to our will.

*Augustine sounds the note of holy desire*

As for those poor who are bereft of all secular resources, because even though wealth flows all around them they are aware how unreliable it is, those poor people who sigh to God and have nothing in this world that gives them pleasure or holds them captive—yes, as for all these who because of the overwhelming pressures and trials they endure are as though trapped in wine presses, let them flow down as wine, or flow down as oil. For what are wine and oil? Good desires. Only God now remains to them as the object of their desires, for they no longer love the earth. They love him who made heaven and earth; they love him, and they are not yet with him. Their desire is kept waiting so that it may grow, and it grows that it may lay hold on its object. It is no paltry thing that God will give to one who longs, but himself, who made all that exists; and no small effort must a lover make to be capable of receiving so great a good. Train yourself until you have a capacity for God; long and long for what you will possess for ever.

## *On not looking back*

Among the Israelites those who were in too much of a hurry were condemned. Indeed, the attitude of people in a hurry is repeatedly censured in scripture. Who are they? They are people who have turned to God, but on not finding here the rest they were seeking, or the joys they were constantly being promised, grow weary on the way. They suppose that there is still a long stretch in front of them, until the end of the world or the end of their lives. They seek some kind of rest here, which, even if obtainable, is illusory, so they look back, and fall away from their purpose. They do not reflect on that fearful admonition, *Remember Lot's wife* (Lk 17:32). Why was she turned into a pillar of salt, if not because her function is to season people, and impart to them the savor of wisdom? The example of her misfortune redounds to your advantage, if you are careful. Remember Lot's wife, says scripture; she looked back at Sodom, from which she had been set free, and there she remained, in that place whence she had cast her backward glance. She was to stay there, to season others who would pass by.

We have been freed from the Sodom of our past lives, so let us not look behind us; for this is what being in a hurry means—paying no heed to what God has promised, because it is a long way off, and looking back at what is very close, from which you have just been delivered. What has the apostle Peter to say about such people? *The proverb is proved true by what happens to them: the dog has returned to its vomit* (2 Pt 2:22). It was like a load on your chest, that former consciousness of your sins. When you received forgiveness it was as though you vomited and got it off your chest; your bad conscience became a good conscience. So why go back again to your vomit? If the sight of a dog doing that is loathsome to you, what are you in God's sight?

4. Beloved brothers and sisters, each one of us looks back if we forsake the place on our journey which we have reached, the place to which we have progressed, the place where we have vowed to God that we will be. For example, someone has resolved to maintain conjugal fidelity (this is the beginning of righteous living); he has given up fornication and unlawful lust. If he returns to fornication once more, he has looked back. Another person has by God's gift vowed something greater, in deciding not to marry at all. He would not have been condemned if he had taken a wife, but if he does so after making that vow to God, he will be condemned, though he is only acting in the same way as someone else who has not made the vow. Yet the latter is not condemned, the former is. Why? Because he looked behind him. He was already further on than that, whereas the other man had not yet reached that point. Similarly a virgin would commit no sin if she married, but if a nun marries she is held to have committed adultery against Christ. She has looked back from the place she had reached. Then again others have chosen to leave behind all secular ambitions and worldly conduct, and betake themselves to a community of holy people, to that life in common where no one claims anything as private property but all goods are common to all, and there is among them but one mind, one heart directed to God. But anyone who decides to abandon that community is not on a par with someone else who never entered it; the latter had not reached that point, but the former had, and looked back.

Well then, dearly beloved, in proportion to the ability of each one, make your vows to the Lord your God, and carry them out as the strength of each permits.

Let none of us look back, none of us take pleasure in our former interests. Let none of us turn away from what lies ahead, to look back to what lies behind us. Let every one of us run until we arrive, for we run not with our feet but with our desire. And let no one claim to have reached the goal while still in this life. Who could be as perfect as Paul was? Yet he says, *I do not suppose, brethren, that I have attained it; one thing only I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining to what lies ahead, I bend my whole effort to follow after the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus* (Phil 3:13-14). When you see Paul still running, do you imagine you have already arrived?

*Verse 2. During this life we are all in the wine press*

5. If you are conscious of the pressures of this world, even when you are enjoying prosperity, you have understood that you are in the wine press. Do you suppose that misfortune in this world is something to be feared, and prosperity is not, my brothers and sisters? By no means: no misfortune can break a person whom no prosperity corrupts. How distrustful, how wary you must be of prosperity, that corrupting jade, lest she seduce you by flattery! Do not lean on a reed for support, for scripture warns us that some did so. Do not trust yourself to it. What you are leaning on is fragile; it will break and stab you.

If this world smiles on you with its favors, reckon yourself to be in the wine press, and say, *I have found anguish and sorrow, and I called on the name of the Lord* (Ps 114(116):3-4). He would not have said, *I have found* it, unless the anguish were something hidden. There is a certain anguish which is hidden from those in this world who assume that, even while they are on pilgrimage and away from the Lord, all is nonetheless well with them. *As long as we are in the body we are on pilgrimage and away from the Lord*, says scripture (2 Cor 5:6). If you were on a journey and far from your human father, you would be unhappy; can you be a pilgrim, away from the Lord, and feel pleased about it? But some there are who do imagine that all is well with them.

But there are others who, though wealth and pleasures flow all round them in abundance, though everything obeys their least whim, though no nuisance sneaks in and no adversity arouses fear, still understand that they are in evil case as long as they are on pilgrimage away from the Lord. Their penetrating gaze has found the anguish and the sorrow, and they have called on the name of the Lord. The singer in this psalm is one of them. Who is the singer? The body of Christ. And who is that? You, if you are willing to be; all of us, if we are willing, all the children of Korah; and they are all one person, because all are the one body of Christ. How could it not be a single person, when it has but one head? Christ is the head of us all, and we are all the body that belongs to that head.

And all of us are in the wine press during this life. If we have the wisdom to know it, we have already arrived at the wine presses. Caught under the pressures of temptation, let us call out in these words, and send our desire ahead of us: *How delightful are your tabernacles, O Lord of hosts!*

The singer was in tabernacles of a kind, namely in the wine presses, but was longing for different tabernacles, where there is no pressing out. In the tabernacles of this life he was yearning for those other tabernacles, and from here he was flowing towards them through the channel of desire.

### *Verse 3. Faint with longing*

6. Now what follows? *My soul faints with longing for the courts of the Lord*. To say only that it *faints with longing* would be to say little. For what is it fainting? For *the courts of the Lord*. A grape pressed out is fainting, certainly, but to what is it aspiring? To the wine, to the trough, to the restful storage-vat, where it will be kept safe in great peace. Here we desire, there we receive; here we sigh with longing, there we rejoice; here we pray, there praise; here we groan, there exult. No one must avoid the process I have described, dismissing it as harsh; no one must avoid it out of reluctance to suffer. A grape that escapes the press must fear being gobbled up by birds or wild animals.

The singer might seem to be in great sadness when he declares, *My soul faints with longing for the courts of the Lord*. Clearly he does not possess what he longs for; but he is not therefore denied joy, is he? What joy, then? The joy of which the apostle spoke: *Rejoicing in hope* (Rom 12:12). Hereafter he will rejoice in the substance, here still in hope. These people who rejoice in hope endure all pressures in the wine press, because they are certain that they will receive what they long for. This is why the apostle, after saying, *Rejoicing in hope*, immediately added, *Patient in anguish*, as though he were addressing those already under the press. *In anguish*, then, we are to be patient. Anything else? Yes, *enduring in prayer*. Why *enduring*? Because you are kept waiting. You pray and you are kept waiting, but go on enduring as you wait. It is worth enduring the waiting for what is withheld, because when it comes it will never be withdrawn.

### *Verse 4. Heart and flesh; the sparrow and the turtledove*

7. You have heard the groan that goes up from the wine press, *My soul faints with longing for the courts of the Lord*; hear now whence the singer draws strength as he rejoices in hope: *My heart and my flesh leap for joy to the living God*. They leap for joy here, towards that other place. What else impels them to leap, but hope? Where does their leaping tend? *To the living God*. What is it in you that leaps for joy? *My heart and my flesh*. And why? Because *the sparrow has found himself a home*, he replies, *and the turtledove a nest where she may place her squabs*. What is this about?

First he mentioned two things, then he substituted two others by way of comparison: he spoke of his heart and his flesh, and then replaced these two with a sparrow and a turtledove; the heart is represented by a sparrow, the flesh by a turtledove. The sparrow has found himself a home; my heart has found itself a home. It plies its wings in the virtues proper to this present life, in faith and hope and charity, using them to fly to its home. When it arrives there it will stay for good, and the pining voice of the sparrow will be heard no more. This is the plaintive sparrow of which another psalm speaks: *Like a lonely sparrow on a roof* (Ps 101:8(102:7)). From the roof he flies to his home. Let him take his stand on the roof already, treading his carnal home underfoot, for he will have a heavenly perch, an everlasting home; then this sparrow will have done with his complaints.

To the turtledove the psalm also assigns squabs; that is to say, it indicates that these are produced by the flesh. *The turtledove has found herself a nest where she may place her squabs*. The sparrow a home, the turtledove a nest, and a nest, moreover, for her young. We

choose a home to last for ever, but a nest is built only for a time; in our heart we think about God, like the sparrow winging his way home, but with the body we perform good works. You can see the impressive good works performed bodily by holy people, for through the body we carry out the works enjoined on us to meet our needs in this life. *Break your bread for the hungry, and take the person with no shelter into your home. If you see anyone naked, clothe him* (Is 58:7). These and similar commands laid on us cannot be obeyed except through our bodies. That sparrow whose thoughts turn homewards does not hold aloof from the turtledove seeking a nest in which to place her squabs (for she does not toss them about at random; she finds a nest to put them in).

What I am saying, my brothers and sisters, is something you know already. How many appear to be engaged in good works outside the Church? How many even among the pagans feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome guests, visit the sick, console prisoners? How many are there who do all this? It looks as though the turtledove is hatching chicks, but she has not found herself a nest. How many good works are carried out by great numbers of heretics, but not in the Church—carried out by heretics who do not put their squabs in the nest? Their little ones will be trodden on and crushed; they will not survive or be kept safe.

A certain woman was presented to us by the apostle Paul as a type of these bodily works, when he said, *Adam was not seduced, but the woman was seduced* (1 Tm 2:14). But afterwards Adam consented to the wishes of the woman who had been seduced by the serpent. It is the same today: the only evil persuasion that can initially arouse your desire is the prompting of your flesh, and if you subsequently consent to it in your mind, the sparrow has fallen; but if you conquer your carnal desires your members are disciplined to perform good works, and concupiscence is robbed of its weapons. Then the turtledove begins to hatch her squabs. That is why the apostle comments, *She will be saved through childbearing* (1 Tm 2:15). But what about a childless widow? If she perseveres in her state, will she not be more blessed? Is she to be debarred from salvation because she bears no children? Will a virgin dedicated to God not be better off as she is? Surely she will not be denied salvation because she has no children? Does she not belong to God?

Yes, of course she does; so the woman who will be saved through child-bearing—saved, that is, if she performs good works—obviously represents the flesh. But the turtledove must not find herself a nest for her chicks haphazardly; she must bring forth her good works within the true faith, in communion with the unity of the Church. This is why when the apostle was speaking on the subject of this woman, he added, *She will be saved through childbearing, provided she perseveres in faith and charity, and a holy, sober way of life* (1 Tm 2:15). When you persevere in faith, it is faith itself that forms the nest for the chicks you will hatch; for our gracious Lord, knowing how weak your turtledove's squabs are, has provided you with your nest-building material. He put on the grass that is your flesh in order to come to you. Place your chicks in this faith; perform your good works in this nest.

What the nests are—or, rather, what nest is meant—the psalm immediately tells us: *your altars, O Lord of hosts*. It is as though after hearing, *The turtledove has found herself a nest where she may place her squabs*, you had asked, “But what is this nest?” *Your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God*. And what does that mean, *my King and my God*? You who rule me and created me.

*Verse 5. Longing for eternal joy; but what shall we find to occupy us in heaven? Praising God will never tire or bore us*

8. Here we have the nest, here our pilgrimage, here our longings, here the friction and here the pressing-out, because this is the wine press. But what does the psalmist desire, what does he yearn for, where is he going? Where does our desire tend, whither is it pulling us? The psalmist is here in body, but far ahead in thought; he is set amid temptations, amid pressures; he is in the wine press, but longing for the heavenly rewards promised him. In anticipation he ponders those future joys, as though meditating already on what he will be doing when he reaches them. *Blessed are they who dwell in your house*, he says. Blessed—but from what will their beatitude spring? What will they have, what will they do? All those who are judged blessed on earth either possess something or are engaged in some activity. “He is a lucky man,” we say, because he has so much land, so numerous a household, so much gold and silver. So he is called blessed because of what he has. Or another is pronounced blessed for attaining certain honors, a proconsulate perhaps, or a prefecture. He is said to be blessed because of what he does. So it is either the having or the doing that renders them blessed.

But what of those who will be blessed hereafter? What will they have, what will they be doing? What they will possess I have indicated already: *blessed are they who dwell in your house*. If you possess your own house you are poor, but if you possess God’s house you are rich. In your own house you will have burglars to fear; in God’s house God himself is the defensive wall. This is why they are *blessed who dwell in your house*. They possess the heavenly Jerusalem without overcrowding, without pressure, without divisions or exclusive boundaries, for all possess it, and each owns the whole. That is wealth indeed. No one cramps his neighbor, and no one is in need.

In that case, what will they find to do? Necessity is the mother of all human activities. I have stated that briefly before, my brothers and sisters: cast your minds over all types of activity, and see if there is any motive for them other than necessity. Take those celebrated arts which are highly valued because they help people by pleading their case or providing medical care: these are excellent activities in this world, but if you get rid of all litigants, who will need the services of an advocate? Eliminate injuries and disease, and what will there be for a doctor to cure? The same is true of all the activities which are carried out in response to the demands of our daily life; they too proceed from necessity. Plowing, sowing, raising young plants, maritime trading—what is it that prompts all such work, if not necessity and our wants? Get rid of hunger, thirst and nakedness, and what will be the point of them all? The same holds also for the good works enjoined upon us—for the activities I have mentioned are honorable, but common to all humankind (I am not speaking, of course, of wicked and detestable deeds like shameful or criminal acts, homicides, housebreaking, adulteries, for I do not count these as human activities). The former are honorable, as I say, and spring from one cause only: necessity, the necessity of our fragile, fleshly condition. The same holds for those charitable works which, as I said, are enjoined upon us. *Break your bread for the hungry*—but for whom will you break it, where no one is hungry? *Take the person with no shelter into your home*—but whom will you welcome as a guest, where all are at home, living in their own country? What sick person can you visit, where all enjoy perpetual health? How will you appease a litigant, where peace reigns eternally? What dead body will you bury, where all live for ever?

It seems, then, that you will engage in none of those honorable activities common to all humankind, but neither will you perform any of the aforementioned charitable works, because these turtledove chicks will have flown from the nest. What will you do? I have already told you what we shall have: *blessed are they who dwell in your house*. But tell me what they are to do, because I cannot see any kind of necessity there which could impel me to action. Even what I am doing now as I talk and discuss with you is the child of necessity. Will there be any such discussion then, in which someone instructs the ignorant or reminds the forgetful? Or will the gospel be proclaimed there in our homeland, where we shall contemplate the very Word of God?

The psalmist has given voice to our desire and our longings, telling us what we are to have in that homeland for which we long, by his words, *blessed are they who dwell in your house*; let him also tell us what we are to do. *They will praise you for ever and ever*. This will be the work that occupies us totally, an “Alleluia” that never fades away.

Brothers and sisters, do not imagine that there will be weariness in that. If you go on saying it for a long time now, you flag, but only because your needs distract you from the joy. What we do not see delights us less, and so if even amid the pressure and the weakness of our flesh we praise with such eagerness what we believe in, how shall we hereafter praise what we see? When death is swallowed up by victory, when our mortal flesh is clothed with immortality and this corruptible body apparelled with incorruption, no one will say, “I have been standing for a long time,” no one will say, “I have kept a long fast, and a long vigil.” We shall be empowered for unshakable standing, and our bodily immortality will itself be sustained by contemplating God. If the word we preach to you now keeps our weak bodies standing for so long, what will that joy do? How will it change us? *We shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is* (1 Jn 3:2). Already we are like him, but then? Shall we weaken? To what shall we turn aside?

Let us have no anxiety, then, brothers and sisters. Praising God, loving God, will not be boring. If you weary of love, you will weary of praise; but if love is everlasting, because that beauty can never cloy, have no fear that you will find yourself unable to praise for ever him whom you will have strength to love for ever. *Blessed, then, are they who dwell in your house; they will praise you for ever and ever*. Let us yearn for that life.

*Verse 6. How to get there? The need for grace*

9. But how are we going to get there? *Blessed is anyone whom you take by the hand, Lord*. The psalmist understood his position, and knew that the weakness of his flesh made it impossible for him to fly to that beatitude. He looked at what weighed him down on every side, for, as scripture says elsewhere, *The corruptible body weighs down the soul, and this earthly dwelling oppresses a mind that considers many things* (Wis 9:15). The spirit calls him upwards, but the weight of the flesh calls him down again; the tension between these two—the upward pull and the dragging weight—is a struggle, and struggle is characteristic of the pressing-out process. Listen to the apostle describing this contest from his position in the wine press, for he too was trampled and crushed there: *I take great delight in God’s law as far as my inner self is concerned, he says, but I am aware of a different law in my members that opposes the law of my mind, and imprisons me under the law of sin inherent in my members* (Rom 7:22-23). This is a mighty conflict, and mighty would be his despair of surviving it, if help did not come to him



from the quarter he goes on to indicate: *Who will deliver me from this death-ridden body, wretch that I am? Only the grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord*(Rom 7:24-25).

Our psalmist likewise saw those future joys, and in his mind reflected, *Blessed are they who dwell in your house, O Lord; they will praise you for ever and ever*. But who will ascend to that place? What am I to do about this heavy flesh? *Blessed are they who dwell in your house; they will praise you for ever and ever. For I take great delight in God's law as far as my inner self is concerned*. But what am I to do? How shall I fly there? How reach it? *I am aware of a different law in my members that opposes the law of my mind*. He confessed himself to be a wretch, and asked, *Who will deliver me from this death-ridden body*, that I may dwell in the Lord's house, and praise him for ever and ever? *Who will deliver me? Only the grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord*.

In the apostle's case what brought him succor in that difficulty, or, rather, that almost unwinnable conflict, was the power he spoke of as *the grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord*; so too as the psalmist yearned with burning desire for God's house and a life spent in praising him, yet considered the weight of his own body and the burden of his flesh, and felt despair beginning to sweep over him, he aroused his mind once more to hope, saying, *Blessed is anyone whom you take by the hand, Lord*.

*Verses 6-7. God places steps in our hearts, in the valley of weeping*

10. What does God provide by this grace of his for the person whom he has taken by the hand? The next line tells us. *God arranges ascents in his heart*. God sets up steps for him to climb. Where? In the person's heart. It follows, then, that the more you love, the higher you will climb. *God arranges ascents in his heart*. Who put them there? The One who took him by the hand, for *blessed is anyone whom you take by the hand, Lord*. He can make no progress by himself, so your grace is needed to take him by the hand. And what does your grace effect? It arranges ascents in his heart. Where are they established? *In his heart, in the valley of weeping enclosed on all sides*. So now, you see, the wine press is called a *valley of weeping*, for the tender tears of the contrite are themselves the grape juice that will be the wine of lovers. *God arranges ascents in his heart*. Where, then? *In the valley of weeping*. Here is the place where he has set the steps, *in the valley of weeping*, for here there are tears at the sowing, as another psalm says, *They went on their way weeping, as they scattered their seed* (Ps 125(126):6). Let there be these steps in your heart, then, these steps set up by God through his grace. Climb them by loving. While you are climbing, the song of ascents rings out. And where has he set up these steps for you? *In your heart, in the valley of weeping*.

So the psalm has told us where he put the steps, and where they lead to. What has he set up? Steps. Where? Within you, *in your heart*. And in what countryside, what place of sojourning? *In the valley of weeping*. And where will they enable you to climb? *To the place he has appointed*. What does that mean, my brothers and sisters, *to the place he has appointed*? He would tell us what place that is, the place God has appointed, if it could be put into words. You have been told that *God arranges ascents in his heart, in the valley of weeping*; do you now ask where they lead? What answer can he give you? They lead to *what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart conceived* (1 Cor 2:9). A mountain, a country, a meadow—all these names have been used for that place. But who can describe it for us as it truly is, without

recourse to any imagery? Who can describe it for us, who see now only tantalizing reflections of what that place is, and only hereafter will see face to face? When you hear *to the place he has appointed*, do not ask whither the steps are leading. He knows whither; he knows, for he has placed his steps in your heart to lead you there. Are you afraid to mount them, as though he who leads you might miss the way?

In the valley of weeping, this is where he has set the steps that lead to *the place he has appointed*. We are in tears now, and where are we, as we weep? In the place where are set the steps we must climb. Why do we weep, if not for that same condition the apostle lamented, seeing a different law in his members, at odds with the law of his mind? And why do we suffer this? As a penalty for sin. We presumed that we could easily be righteous by our own efforts before we received the commandment; but when the commandment was issued sin sprang to life again, and I died; so says the apostle. The law was given to humankind not to bring them immediate salvation, but to reveal to them the sickness in which they lay. Listen to the apostle's words: *If a law capable of giving life had been granted to us, then of course righteousness would have been obtainable through the law; but scripture has included all things under sin, so that through faith in Jesus Christ the promise may be given to believers* (Gal 3:21-22), and so that grace, coming after law, may find us not merely lying sick but also confessing and lamenting, *Who will deliver me from this death-ridden body, wretch that I am?*

The physician was to come to the valley of weeping when he was most sorely needed, and to say to us, "You are fully convinced now that you have fallen; listen to me that you may get up again, since you fell by despising me." The purpose of the law was to persuade the patient of his disease when he deluded himself that he was in good health; its purpose was to show up our sins for what they were, not to remove them. But once the law had been given, and sin shown up thereby for what it was, sin increased, because now it was both sin and transgression of the law: *Taking advantage of the commandment, sin caused every kind of concupiscence to arise in me*, says scripture (Rom 7:8). What does *taking advantage of the commandment* mean? People attempted to keep by their own strength the commandment they had been given; but when they were over-powered by concupiscence they became all the more guilty through their patent disobedience to the commandment.

But what else has the apostle to say? *Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more* (Rom 5:20); that is to say, as the disease grew graver, the remedy was supplied. This is why we are told about those five porticoes of Solomon, my brothers and sisters. There was a pool in the center of them, but were the sick cured? *The sick were accustomed to lie in the five porticoes*, we read in the gospel (Jn 5:3). The five porticoes represent the law recorded in the five books of Moses. The sick were brought from their homes to lie in the porticoes; and the law likewise exposed sick persons without healing them. But the water was disturbed from time to time as though by the descent of an angel, and when this was observed one person, whoever could manage it, would go down into it and be cured. Now that pool ringed by five porticoes represents the Jewish people confined by the law. The Lord disturbed them very gravely by his presence, to the end that he might be killed. Would the Lord have been crucified if he had not disturbed the Jews by his descent? No, and therefore the troubled water represents the Lord's passion, which took place when the Jewish nation was disturbed. Any ailing person who believes in Christ's passion goes down, as it were, into the turbulent water, and is restored to health.

Having found no healing in the law (that is, in the porticoes), such a one is healed by grace, through faith in the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. And he is one, not many. Indeed, he is unity itself.

What, then, has our psalm to say? *God arranges ascents in his heart, in the valley of weeping enclosed on all sides, leading to the place he has appointed.* Already we have the prospect of joy in that place.

*Verses 8-10. Progress from the many virtues of action to the one virtue of contemplation*

11. But why *in the valley of weeping*? What is this valley of weeping from which we are to travel to that place of joy? *For he who gave the law will give a blessing too*, says the psalm. He has cast us down with the law, oppressed us under the law, and shown us the wine press. We in turn have witnessed the press-ing-out, recognized the pressure exerted by our flesh, and groaned as sin rebelled against our minds. We have cried out, *Wretch that I am!* and we have moaned under the law's domination. What is left for us now, except for the lawgiver to give us his blessing instead? Grace will come after the law, and grace is itself the blessing. And what does this grace, this blessing, do for us? *They will walk from many powers to one single power.* Here below many powers are conferred through grace: *to one is given wise utterance through the Spirit, to another knowledgeable speech according to the same Spirit, to another faith, to another gifts of healing, to another various tongues, to another powers of interpretation, and to another prophecy* (1 Cor 12:8-10). There is a multiplicity of powers because here they are all necessary, but we shall proceed from these many powers to one alone. What is this unique power? Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. He it is who grants these varied powers in our present circumstances, powers which are necessary or useful in the valley of weeping; but in their place he will give us one single power—himself.

Indeed, the powers or virtues we need to practice in our lives are four in number; they are described by many writers, and found also in scripture. One is called prudence, and by it we differentiate between good and evil. Another is called justice; by it we render to every person what is due, being in debt to no one, but loving them all. Temperance comes next, the virtue by which we control our bodily impulses. Finally there is fortitude, which enables us to bear all vexations. These virtues are granted to us now in the valley of weeping, but from them we progress to a single virtue. And what will that be? The virtue of contemplating God alone. Our prudence will not be necessary there, because we shall encounter no evils we need to avoid. And what of the rest, my brothers and sisters? There will be no need for justice, where no one will be in poverty and in need of our assistance. Nor will there be any occasion for temperance, because no unruly passions will be there to require control. Fortitude will have no place either, where no distress exists to be endured. We shall pass, then, from these many virtues of action to that one virtue of contemplation, by which we are empowered to contemplate God, according to the scriptural word, *In the morning I will stand before you, and contemplate you* (Ps 5:5(3)).

Listen now to further evidence that we shall proceed from these virtues of action to contemplation. The psalm prophesies, *They will walk from many virtues to one single virtue.* What virtue is that? The virtue of contemplating. And what does “contemplating” imply? *The God of gods will be seen in Zion.* By *the God of gods* we should understand the Christ of Christians. Perhaps you are wondering how that can be? Remember, *I have spoken, and*

*you are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you* (Ps 81(82):6), for he gave them power to become children of God, he in whom we have believed, the beautiful bridegroom who on account of our deformity was seen here himself deformed, for *we saw him*, says the prophet, *and he had no beauty to attract us* (Is 53:2). But when all the neediness of our mortality is over and done with, he who is God with God, the Word with the Father, the Word through whom all things were made, will show himself to the pure-hearted. *Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God* (Mt 5:8). *The God of gods will be seen in Zion.*

12. Back he turns now from the thought of those joys, back to his sighing. He takes stock of what he has anticipated in hope, and of where he still is in fact. *The God of gods will hereafter be seen in Zion*, and that is the spring of our joy; we shall praise him for ever and ever. But now it is still the season for prayer and petition, and if for some rejoicing, then only in hope. We are on pilgrimage, still in the valley of weeping. The psalmist resumes the groaning proper to this place as he says, *Lord, God of hosts, hear my prayer; hearken to me, O God of Jacob*, because you made Jacob into Israel. God appeared to Jacob, and in consequence he was called Israel, which means “one who sees God.” Hear me, then, O God of Jacob, and make me Israel. When shall I become Israel? When the God of gods shows himself in Zion.

13. *Turn your gaze upon us, God our protector.* It is written that under the shadow of your wings they will hope for protection, so *turn your gaze upon us, God our protector, and look into the face of your anointed.* When does God ever cease to look into the face of his Christ, his anointed one? What can it mean, then, to pray to him, *Look into the face of your anointed?* It is by our faces that we are known to others, so what is the force of *look into the face of your anointed?* It means, “Let your Christ be known to everyone,” so that we may pass from manifold virtues to the one virtue, and grace overflow yet more copiously where sin overflowed.

*Verse 11. To be in the courts, the house, of the Lord is all that matters*

14. *One day within your courts is better than thousands elsewhere.*

Those courts are the place for which he was sighing and fainting. My soul is longing and fainting for the courts of the Lord, for one day there is better than thousands of days. Thousands of days—this is what many people aspire to, for they want a long life here. Let them make light of thousands of days and desire one day, the day that has no sunrise, no sunset, the one day that is an eternal day, the day that does not displace yesterday or find itself hard pressed by tomorrow. That one day is what we should desire. What use are thousands of days to us? We are traveling from thousands of days towards one day, just as we are proceeding from many virtues to one alone.

15. *I would rather be degraded in the Lord's house than dwell in the tents of sinners.* The speaker has experienced the valley of weeping, he has found that humility from which he may make his way upward, he knows that if he tries to exalt himself he will fall, but that if he humbles himself he will be lifted up; so he has chosen to be cast down in order to be uplifted. How many there are outside this tent that houses the Lord's wine press, that is, outside the Catholic Church, who are so keen to be exalted, so enamored of their rank, that they are unwilling to acknowledge the truth! If they only took this verse to heart, *I would rather be degraded in the Lord's house than dwell in the tents of sinners*, would they not throw away the

trappings of rank and come running to the valley of weeping, to find the steps in their hearts that lead up from here, and progress from many virtues to the one virtue, placing their hope in Christ, rather than in any mere human? A good saying it is, a saying to rejoice over and make our own: *I would rather be degraded in the Lord's house than dwell in the tents of sinners*. The speaker has chosen to be degraded in the Lord's house, but he who has invited us to the banquet calls the guest who chose a lower place to a more honorable one, commanding him, *Move up higher* (Lk 14:10). For his own part all he wanted was to be in the Lord's house: whereabouts did not matter, as long as he was not outside.

*Verse 12. How the Lord combines mercy with justice*

16. Why did he choose to be degraded in the Lord's house, rather than dwell in the tents of sinners? *Because God loves mercy and justice*. The Lord loves that mercy which prompted him to come to my aid in the first instance; but he also loves justice because he wills to give to the believer what he promised. Look at the mercy and justice shown to the apostle Paul, who was at first Saul the persecutor. He needed mercy, and testified that it had been shown to him: *I was originally a persecutor and a blasphemer, and harmed people. But I received mercy that Christ Jesus might give proof in me of his long forbearance toward those who will believe in him unto eternal life* (1 Tm 1:13.16). He meant to ensure that none of us shall despair of our sins being forgiven, whatever they may be, seeing that Paul received pardon for such great offenses. There you have divine mercy. God was not willing to exercise his justice at that time by punishing a sinner. If he had, would that not have been justice? Would anyone who was in no position to claim, "I have not sinned," have the audacity to say, "I should not be punished"? And if such a person were to say, "I have not sinned," to whom would such a claim be made? Who would be deceived by it? No, the Lord granted mercy to Paul as a privilege in advance, and then after the mercy came the justice. Listen now to Paul demanding justice: *I was originally a persecutor and a blasphemer, and harmed people; but by God's grace I am what I am* (1 Tm 1:13; 1 Cor 15:10). Later, as he approached his suffering, he declared, *I have fought the good fight, I have run the whole course, I have kept the faith; all that remains for me now is the crown of righteousness*.

He who granted mercy to me reserves justice now. On what grounds? With *the crown of righteousness*, Paul says, *the just judge will recompense me on that day* (2 Tm 4:7-8). He granted forgiveness as a free gift, but he will give the crown as just recompense; he is a donor of forgiveness, but a debtor when it comes to the crown. How can he be a debtor? Has he received any favor? Does God owe anything to anyone? Yet we see Paul holding God to his debts, for having received mercy, he now demands justice. *The Lord will recompense me on that day*, he says. What is given you as a recompense? Something that is owed to you, obviously. But how does God owe it to you? What did you give him? Who took any initiative in giving to God, so as to earn a recompense? The Lord has made himself a debtor, not by receiving anything but by making promises. We cannot say to him, "Give back what you received," but we can say, "Give what you promised." Paul testifies, "He expended mercy for me, to make me innocent. Until then I had been a blasphemer and I harmed people, but by his grace I became innocent." Could the one who granted mercy as a privilege in advance now renege on his debt? He *loves mercy and justice; he will grant grace and glory*. And what grace is that? Surely what Paul spoke of: *By God's grace I am what I am*. And what glory, if not that of which he said, *All that remains for me now is the crown of righteousness?*

*Verse 13. The ultimate good, God himself*

17. Accordingly the psalm continues, *The Lord will not deprive those who walk in innocence of any good things*. Now why, mortal creatures, are you reluctant to preserve your innocence? Because you hope to possess good things? Suppose someone is unwilling to hold on to his innocence by giving back something entrusted to him: that person wants to have gold, and loses innocence. Where is the gain? And what is the loss? He gains the gold, but suffers the loss of innocence. Is anything more precious than innocence? “But if I keep my innocence I shall be poor,” he objects. Is not innocence itself considerable wealth? If you have a chest full of gold, you will be rich; if you have a heart full of innocence, will you be poor? While you long for good things now, in your penury, in distress, in the valley of weeping, under pressure, amid trials, preserve your innocence. Afterwards there will be that good time you hanker for. Rest, eternity, immortality, freedom from suffering—the time for these will come later, for these are the good things God is keeping for the righteous ones who belong to him.

As for those good things by which you set such store now, for the sake of which you are prepared to be not innocent but noxious, consider the people who have them, and have them in plenty. You see wealth in the hands of robbers, godless folk, criminals and base characters; you see the vicious and the villainous in possession of riches. God allows them these things because out of his overflowing, boundless goodness he treats us all as members of one human community; and so he causes his sun to rise over the good and the wicked, and sends his rain upon righteous and unrighteous alike. If he gives so much even to bad people, does he keep nothing in reserve for you? Is his promise to you not to be trusted? He keeps it; do not worry. Will he who took pity on you when you were strangers desert you now that you are his loyal friends? If he forgave a sinner through the death of his Son, what is he reserving for one who has been saved through the death of his Son? Have no anxiety, then. Hold him to his debt, because you believed him when he made the promise. *The Lord will not deprive those who walk in innocence of any good things*. What is being kept for us, then, for us in the wine press, in vexation, in hardship, in our present, perilous life? What is kept for us, that we may make our way to it? *Lord, God of hosts, blessed is everyone who hopes in you.*