

James Houston Prayer Course Discussion Questions

Session 18: "Augustine's Interpretation of the Psalms (Part 1)"

- 1) Augustine lived in the Psalms. They were central to his journey of humility and faith. He saw intelligence in the Psalms, vastly superior to human intelligence. They made his prayers more articulate and enlightened his praise of God, guiding the transformation of his life. One of his favourites is (Psalm 89:15) "blessed are those who understand the reason for their joy."¹ He saw this as affirmation of how revealing the Psalms are for understanding the motives of his heart (intentio cordis). They taught him how to express himself authentically. He understood the Psalms as the means to interpret all his emotions, so that to understand our emotions we must all read the Psalms. Have you read a Psalm that fired up **your** emotions? If yes, what was it that fired them up?
- 2) The psalms can be read liturgically, prophetically, emotively, or obediently as signposts for right-relatedness. They point to the future, to a new covenant that Christ will reveal as fulfilment of law and prophecy. Christ is the hermeneutical² key to understand the Psalms, mediating understanding of our Godward desires that originate from our memory of our heavenly Father's love. This is what Augustine sees. What do you see the Psalms revealing to you?
- 3) What Augustine realised is that the actualising insights that occurred in his heart from reading the Psalms was designed for mankind's benefit. As he says in his book *On Christian Doctrine*, the key to Biblical exposition is how we are to understand these things personally and pastorally. The implication is we must digest the insight, eat it, be refreshed by it, and be rebuked by it. Aware that the Psalms also have a collective purpose, he says they are representative of the whole body of Christ. In other words, they are representative of the human condition both individually and collectively at the same time. What insights about yourself and mankind have you discovered from reading the Psalms?
- 4) The Psalms are types of our struggles and joys, as we have already seen in the previous lecture on Hesychia with the Old Testament typology of the Israelites in the desert. The Psalms are types of our experience, but also types in light of the incarnation and what it has done and continues to do for us in the future. And so in Augustine's exposition of a homily on Psalm 97:3,

¹There are many different versions of the English translation of this Psalm. I chose what is most reflective of what I believe Augustine understood from this Psalm.

² Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts, wisdom literature, and philosophical texts. It includes both verbal and non-verbal communication as well as semiotics, presuppositions, and pre-understandings. Hermeneutics has been broadly applied in the humanities, especially in law, history and theology. Hermeneutics was initially applied to the interpretation, or exegesis, of scripture, and has been later broadened to questions of general interpretation. The terms "hermeneutics" and "exegesis" are sometimes used interchangeably. Hermeneutics is a wider discipline which includes written, verbal, and non-verbal communication. Exegesis focuses primarily upon the word and grammar of texts.

he is saying we must apply all of this to Christ if we want to keep to the path of correct understanding. Whatever doubts we may have to understand Scriptures, we must cling to Christ and His teaching. He will reveal the understanding to us; and when it occurs we must accept the insight, but before having attained the insight, we must not presume to have understood. For Augustine, to the extent we internalize Christ's mediated understanding of His Father and Holy Spirit in ourselves, will be the extent we can answer the following question: Are there any examples in the Psalms, in which you have seen yourself, that have helped you understand yourself in light of the life of Christ?³

³ For the Church Fathers knowledge of God and of ourselves progress together.