

PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

Lifting Eyes and Awakening Hearts: Augustine and the Essential Work of Preaching to Stir and Stimulate Joy

Elliot Ku, BA/BEEd (History), MDiv, MTS, PhD (Candidate)¹ ✉

¹ Christ College, Sydney

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The current pandemic period has raised the question of which vocations constitute as “essential work”. While there are many important and critical ones, the following essay argues that pastors have the unique and essential privilege of preaching to stir and stimulate Christian joy. Firstly, I propose this by examining Augustine’s matter of preaching - specifically, his theology of joy in his sermon on Psalm 95, with reference to his understanding of the bifurcation of joy and his proposed four reasons for joy. Secondly, I examine Augustine’s manner of preaching, which understood rightly, inspires preachers today to engage in the work of lifting eyes and awakening hearts through the work of preaching.

“You need to laugh devoutly with the Lord if you want to laugh safely at the world” (*Enarrat. Ps.*, 94.2)

INTRODUCTION

The recent COVID-19 lockdowns across the world have raised the question of who qualifies as an essential or authorised worker. The description “essential worker” has become a popular expression and category since the start of COVID-19 lockdowns. According to the government, these essential workers are those whom our nation cannot live without. They are men and women who possess skills, provide services, and offer care that is so crucial that they are granted the privilege of movement in the face of widespread restriction. Unsurprisingly, most citizens have warmly embraced and accepted this category given its significance and necessity. However, questions remain with regards to how an essential worker is defined.

To be sure, there is broadly an agreement that some like medical workers, law enforcers, and supermarket workers ought to be given the freedom to continue their work. After all, the pandemic crisis would be worsened if citizens are faced with hospitals with closed doors or are redirected to voicemail when they call emergency services. However, what’s the next profession or vocation in line? Political, medical, and economic debates around defining an essential worker have been a cause for social frustration.¹

¹ For example, this tension erupted in Sydney Australia in July of 2021 when the New South Wales Premier placed harsh restrictions on the construction industry, thereby categorising construction workers as “unessential”. After much backlash and consultation, the Premier soon restored the status of construction workers as essential. See “‘It’s just hypocrisy’: Sydney construction workers say LGA lockdowns ‘crippling’ industry,” *The Guardian*, 2021, accessed September 28, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/jul/31/its-just-hypocrisy-sydney-construction-workers-say-lga-lockdowns-crippling-industry>.

Amid this discussion is another interesting question for Christians and churches: where do pastors (or Christian ministry workers in general) fit in this debate? The answer to this question largely depends on what they are perceived to offer in a pandemic world. A brief look at the rules and regulations surrounding church gatherings and Christian ministry during the thick of lockdown and movement restrictions reveals that the general attitude towards pastors and Christian workers is indifference. After all, churches were shut for months, and Christian gatherings were low on the list of activities to be re-instituted. It would appear that pastors should just sit tight, let the essential workers help us navigate through this crisis, wait for the pandemic to blow over, and then get back to what they were doing before. Yet, an examination of Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (Explanation of the Psalms) reveals that pastors are given by God to shepherd God's people in exactly times such as these. Indeed, one could argue that it is precisely during these moments of crisis that pastors and Christian ministry workers are *most* needed.

Therefore, this essay argues that a close reading of Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (Explanation of the Psalms) and an examination of his message and model summons pastors today to the essential work of lifting eyes and awakening hearts by preaching the unique message of Christian joy.² Physicians offer cure, law enforcers offer protection, and pastors offer the joy of Jesus Christ in the Gospel which enables us to make sense of, and thrive in the midst of, the current crisis.³ This exhortation can be seen more specifically in Augustine's commentary on Psalm 95 where he discusses the types of joy and offers four reasons for Christian joy that provides and acts as a balm to the earthly experience of chaos and confusion.⁴

OUR SHARED EXPERIENCE

Augustine explores the basic human need for joy from the very beginning of his sermon to the end. For example, commenting on the title of Psalm 95, Augustine surveys the common threats to psychological wellbeing by discussing negative emotions such as anxiety and shame which plague the human experience.⁵ Additionally, halfway through the sermon, Augustine addresses the threats to physical safety as a sensitive pastor by acknowledging the trials and troubles that his listeners faced because of persecution against

2 The paper has in view vocational pastors and ministry workers because the task of preaching during the patristic era was predominantly reserved for members of the clergy, especially priests and bishops. However, I recognise that the task of preaching is not biblically limited to paid and vocational leaders, but is indeed strengthened by the myriad of lay and unpaid elders, deacons, Bible study leaders, and volunteers. Nevertheless, the government's public health orders currently impose restrictions on members of clergy or members of religious orders. Therefore, this paper seeks to engage at that level of discussion. Notwithstanding, it is my hope that the core message of the paper resonates with and is applicable to all who are engaged in the task of preaching.

3 To be sure, while the focus of this essay is on how Augustine's sermon on Psalm 95 can form our posture and response to the current COVID-19 crisis, the principles examined below can nevertheless be applied to troubled times in general.

4 It is worth noting that Augustine follows the Septuagint numbering of the Psalms which is one behind the Hebrew Bible and English translations. Therefore, while the Psalm in focus is Psalm 95, references to Augustine's commentary on the Psalm will appear as Psalm 94.

5 Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms: 73-98*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding, vol. 4 (New York: New City Press, 2000). 94.1.

Christians.⁶ Finally, in his concluding remarks, Augustine warns about the threats to eternal security by speaking of “perdition, the heat of eternal fire, and the damnation with the devil...”, thereby emphasising the need for joy not only in this life but also for the one to come.⁷ In the face of all of these challenges, Augustine identifies the fragility of the human experience and interestingly, suggests that what his listeners need is a sort of joy that can enable them to withstand the pressures of present pain and future uncertainty.

Although there are sharp dissimilarities between Augustine’s context and that of ours in the 21st century, it is arguable that the emotional burdens of anxiety and shame, the worries about health and physical safety, and the concerns for the future are more common than it first appears. The shared experiences are especially noticeable under the current conditions of the pandemic, and this is well illustrated and documented by recent studies into the relationship between COVID-19 and emotional responses. For example, a study by a team of Australians on the impact of lockdown restrictions and mood responses demonstrates that COVID-19 has resulted in an increase of depressive symptoms and negative feelings. More specifically, the authors state that “the pandemic has undoubtedly caused fear and loss for many individuals; health fears for self and loved ones, fear of isolation, loss of income, social support, and a sense of normality, the list is extensive”.⁸ Other studies conducted across different countries reveal a similar trend and they consistently report an increase in adverse psychological impacts due to the COVID-19 health crisis.⁹ Consequently, researchers and clinicians have sought to explore ways to address or minimise these negative effects, and these range from recommendations to spend more time outdoors, to recognise our grief, and to increase levels of community and social engagement.¹⁰

Therefore, while the circumstances between Augustine’s and ours may be different, the experiences are surprisingly similar – our psychological wellbeing, physical safety, and eternal security are frail and fragile. However, Augustine through his commentary on Psalm 95 provides a slightly different alternative to the common modern remedies to these experiences. To be sure, Augustine’s recommendation neither contradicts nor undermines modern medical advice. Instead, he suggests a relief that has been tried and tested by Christian communities across multiple generations and one that looks beyond the

⁶ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94:9.

⁷ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94:15.

⁸ Peter C. Terry, Renée L. Parsons-Smith, and Victoria R. Terry, “Mood Responses Associated With COVID-19 Restrictions,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, no. 3090 (2020).

⁹ M. A. Fardin, “COVID-19 and Anxiety: A Review of Psychological Impacts of Infectious Disease Outbreaks,” Review Article, *Arch Clin Infect Dis* 15, no. COVID-19 (2020). ; Cuiyan Wang et al., “Immediate Psychological Responses and Associated Factors during the Initial Stage of the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Epidemic among the General Population in China,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 5 (2020).

¹⁰ Leonhard K. Lades et al., “Daily emotional well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic,” *British Journal of Health Psychology* 25, no. 4 (2020). ; Daniela Marzana et al., “Community dimensions and emotions in the era of COVID-19,” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*.

resources that are available in this world. The recommendation that Augustine offers is the unique experience and hope of Christian joy – an antidote that does not remove any of these threats but instead helps Christians to interpret these events with a biblical lens and experience comfort and contentment in the face of them.

TWO TYPES OF JOY

According to Augustine, this joy is what we need in order to face the threats to our psychological wellbeing, physical safety, and eternal security. More specifically, this is an eschatological joy that helps us to make sense of and live happily in the present. However, before discussing the foundation of this joy, Augustine begins his sermon introduction by discussing the two types of joy: the difference between bad joy and good joy.

The distinction between the two is that good or heavenly joy which the Psalmist invites readers to experience is “a great banquet of joy, *but it is joy in the Lord*, not in the world”.¹¹ An examination of the introduction to his sermon reveals that Augustine labours to clarify this detail and warn his audience about this distinction for at least two reasons. Firstly, Augustine recognises that there may be experiences of joy that *seem* like good joy but actually have the wrong source and therefore wrong purpose and end. In other words, bad joy may feel good but it ultimately fails.

Augustine discusses the disappointing effects of bad joy in many parts of his commentary on the Psalms. For example, in his discussion on Psalm 31, Augustine warns against it generally by expressing God’s anger towards joy or happiness in worldly things. He says “you [God] hate those who hold the world’s false happiness in high esteem”.¹² Moreover, Augustine also warns against it specifically by calling out examples of worldly joy. He states:

If you put your trust in money, you are paying futile regard to vain things; if you put your trust in high office or some exalted rank in human government, you are paying futile regard to vain things, if you put your trust in some powerful friend, you are paying futile regard to vain things. When you put your trust in all these, either you expire, and leave them all behind, or they will crumble while you are still alive, and *what you trusted will have let you down*.¹³

Therefore, in very honest and pastoral terms, Augustine identifies sources of worldly joy that promise much yet leave us more deflated than before. In her examination of Augustine’s understanding of the relationship between

¹¹ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.2 (emphasis added).

¹² Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 30.1.7.

¹³ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 30.2.12 (emphasis added).

eschatology and emotions in the Explanation of the Psalms, Sarah Stewart-Kroeker emphasises that Augustine's eschatology is critical in enabling us to determine error from truth, and that there are thus numerous emotions (in this case, joy) that require biblical correction.¹⁴ Justin Shaun Coyle similarly distinguishes these two kinds of joy in Augustine's thought in the *Confessions* and highlights that joy and subsequently laughter can be good or bad, depending on our judgment upon a situation.¹⁵ Therefore, Augustine shows in his sermon on Psalm 95 that just as one can love wrongly, one can similarly rejoice wrongly. Thus, Augustine comments "it would have been enough to say, *Let us rejoice exceedingly*, without adding, *to the Lord*, but for the fact that there is a bad kind of rejoicing: rejoicing over this world".¹⁶ In doing so, Augustine echoes the Psalmist's concern for all who are drawn to the dangerous and misleading fruits of worldly joy. Therefore, he asks rhetorically to those who seek worldly joy, "where are you going? What hiding place are you looking for? Where are you off to? Where do you think to escape, by rejoicing with this world...*why seek your enjoyment in a place where you will certainly come to grief?*"¹⁷ This series of rhetorical questions reveals the folly of pursuing worldly joy and consequently sets his listeners up for a counter proposal. Immediately following these questions, Augustine invites his readers with confidence by saying "come on, let us exult rather in him by whom we were created".¹⁸ Therefore, another reason for Augustine's clear and repeated caution against worldly joy is because he is convinced that heavenly joy or "joy in the Lord" is indescribably better. This is illustrated in Augustine's discussion on what it means to "shout for joy to God, our salvation" where he explains, "what is shouting for joy? When we cannot express our joy in words, and *yet we want to use our voices to give proof of what we have conceived within but cannot articulate*, that is shouting for joy."¹⁹

According to Augustine, the act of rejoicing in the Lord is so great and overwhelming that those who experience it are lost for words. There is an ecstatic element to the joy that Augustine describes. However, it is ecstatic not to the point of losing one's senses. In his definition of joy, Adam Potkay writes that there may be experiences of joy that pass into ecstasy. In this ecstatic state, the one experiencing joy "is cleaved away from the body, *the senses annihilated*; absence becomes fulfilment".²⁰ This experience which Potkay describes finds

14 For example, Stewart-Kroeker writes that "when one covets the goods of those who may be forfeiting eternal happiness for temporal prosperity, one implicitly mistakes the *source* of happiness. This is a serious misperception, which derails the order that guides the whole aim of moral and affective formation". See Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, "World-Weariness and Augustine's Eschatological Ordering of Emotions in *enarratio* in Psalmum 36," *Augustinian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2016).

15 Justin Shaun Coyle, "Taking Laughter Seriously in Augustine's *Confessions*," *Augustinian Studies* 49, no. 1 (2018): 72.

16 Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.2.

17 Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.2 (emphasis added).

18 Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.2.

19 Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.3 (emphasis added).

20 Adam Potkay, *The Story of Joy: From the Bible to Late Romanticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), 27. (emphasis added).

similarity with the contemporary expression of “losing yourself”. Yet, a close reading of Augustine’s understanding of inexpressible joy is not an ecstatic losing of oneself. Rather, it is to experience joy in such breadth and depth that words are insufficient to describe it. For example, in his commentary on Psalm 27.6, he discusses what it means to offer sacrifices of great joy, and he writes, “we offer a sacrifice of joy, a sacrifice of gladness, a sacrifice of thanksgiving which cannot be expressed in words...What then do we sacrifice? Superabundant and *inexpressible gladness*, not with words, but with wordless cries of rejoicing.”²¹

According to Augustine, Christian joy – the kind of joy that the Psalmist invites readers to embrace and experience is beyond earthly expression. Our hearts feel it though our words fail to describe it. Therefore, in contrast to bad or worldly joys that consistently overpromise and underdeliver, Augustine is careful in distinguishing the two and offering good or Christian joy to his audience. He is convinced that Christian joy is necessary in order to live in a broken world and to withstand the threats to our psychological wellbeing, physical safety, and eternal security. Furthermore, Augustine believes that this joy is available to those who are both near and far away from God – no one has to be excluded.

As an aside, it is noteworthy that Augustine’s extensive treatment of the distinction between good and bad joy is similar to Bryan Chappell’s idea of a Fallen Condition Focus (FCF). Although most of Augustine’s sermons do not always have a unifying theme which ties the whole message together, his sermon on Psalm 95 is an exception and is thus a unique example which demonstrates its effectiveness. Chappell explains the concept of the Fallen Condition Focus by stating, “the fallen condition focus is the mutual human condition that contemporary persons share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God’s people to glorify and enjoy him.”²²

At the risk of anachronism, what readers observe in Augustine’s sermon on Psalm 95 is a Fallen Condition Focus of sorts, which thus empowers his immediate audience to empathise with the Psalmist’s message and enables modern readers to enter into Augustine’s world and that of the Psalmist’s. It is also similar to Matthew Kim’s HABIT Framework which exhorts preachers to labour in i) understanding the original author’s cultural context, ii) interpreting the present cultural assumptions, conflicts, and questions, before iii) applying the Gospel into these specific situations.²³ Therefore, after

²¹ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 26.2.12 (emphasis added).

²² Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Baker, 2018), 30.

²³ HABIT stands for 1. Historical, Grammatical, and Literary Context, 2. Author’s Cultural Context, 3. Big Idea of the Text, 4. Interpret In Your Context, and 5. Theological Presuppositions. See Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear Our Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 39-44.

exploring the two kinds of joy and warning about the dangers of worldly joy, Augustine's sermon on Psalm 95 turns to expounding the basis of Christian joy which he invites his listeners to experience. Up to this point, Augustine like a good preacher has intricately and carefully introduced the common human longing for joy and the false sources they turn to. He has diagnosed the problem and now begins to offer the cure. Augustine begins the treatment by asking the question "what are the perspectives of this song of praise?". Or in other words "on what basis does the Psalmist call upon his readers to shout for and experience this kind of joy?", to which he gives four reasons.²⁴

REASON 1: GOD'S AUTHORITY OVER 'GODS'

Firstly, Augustine argues that Christians have an inexpressible joy because of the Psalmist's declaration that "the Lord is the great God, and a great King above all gods" (Psalm 95:3). In simple terms, the greatness of God is a source for Christian joy. More specifically, Augustine highlights that Christians can have joy because God is greater than the demons and the evil forces of the world, and because God is great in giving humans the eyes to see and hearts to believe in order that we may become children of God.

These two conclusions arise out of Augustine's understanding of the word 'god'. Augustine begins by turning to Psalm 96, and based on his Latin text which follows the Septuagint, he states that the 'gods' in Psalm 95:3 are the 'gods of the nations' of Psalm 96:5 which are demons ("the gods of the heathen are demons, but the Lord made the heavens"). According to Augustine, these demons have power and authority over people, stating, "temples were built to demons, altars were set up to demons, priests ordained for the service of demons, sacrifices offered to demons, and ecstatic ravers were brought in as prophets for demon."²⁵ According to Augustine, demons are more than figments of imaginations — they possess real power and control particularly over pagans, and these demons exercise their influence for the purpose of deceiving humanity and claiming the worship that belongs to God alone.²⁶

However, despite the power they possess, Augustine echoes the Psalmist's claim that God is greater. God's greatness is seen not only in the Psalmist's statement that he is the "great King above all gods" (Psalm 95:3). Augustine also draws a connection to the declaration that "the LORD made the heavens" (Psalm 96:5). Augustine directs his audiences' attention to the statement to show the absolute separation and distinction between God and demons, and in doing so, demonstrates God's undeniable superiority over them. More specifically, Augustine writes that:

²⁴ Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 94.5.

²⁵ Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 94.6.

²⁶ "Those demons wanted to pass themselves off as gods, so they demanded that all those sacrifices should be rendered to them in order to deceive people, because they know that such services are due to the true God." Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 94.6.

Your Lord made a realm where demons cannot live, for the demons were thrown down from heaven. The heavens are therefore more honourable than the demons, and your Lord is more honourable than the heavens, since he created them. *How much loftier must he be than the demons who are held to be gods by the pagans, if he is loftier than the heavens from which angels fell, to be turned into demons?*²⁷

In other words, if there is a chasm between the heavens and the demons, then how much greater is the separation between God (who is greater than the heavens) and the demons (who are lower than the heavens)? The comparison which Augustine uses heightens the power distance between God and demons, thereby demonstrating that while the threats of demonic deception and destruction are real, these demons do not stand a chance against the God who is greater above all gods.

The joy based on God's greatness over demons, the powers of this dark world, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12) guards Christians from fatalistic despair or chaotic superstition. It protects us from believing the lie that the battle between God and demons, good and evil, light and darkness, righteousness and unrighteousness are an even playing field where the outcome is uncertain. Augustine demonstrates that God's greatness over demons is a secure promise that no evil forces will have the last word on those who belong to him. Moreover, God's greatness and humanity's experience of joy is heightened as Augustine also argues that the 'gods' of Psalm 95:4 are also human beings. To be sure, Augustine does not suggest that humans are ontologically similar to God, nor that they are equal to God in his power, majesty, or strength. Instead, he writes that "he calls them *gods* in virtue of participation, not nature; *they are gods by the grace through which he willed to deify them*".²⁸ According to Augustine, this deification of humanity further emphasises God's greatness.

Augustine makes this claim firstly by establishing that the Lord God stands in contrast to false gods. Unlikely these false gods which are fashioned by pagans using silver or gold, the true God is instead the creator of the universe. The false gods "have mouths but they will never speak; eyes, but they will never see".²⁹ On the other hand, the Lord God is not made but is instead the maker. Secondly, and significantly, Augustine notes that not only is the true God *not* fashioned by human hands, he makes humans 'gods' by giving them eyes to see, comprehend, and believe in him. Augustine states that "the true God makes gods of those who believe in him, for he has given them power to become

²⁷ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.6 (emphasis added).

²⁸ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.6 (emphasis added).

²⁹ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.6.

children of God”.³⁰ Augustine highlights that humanity is granted dignity and protection not only by virtue of being made in God’s image; those by his grace are granted an even higher status – children of God.

To be sure, Augustine’s theology of deification is not as detailed in *Explanation of the Psalms* as it is in other works such as *City of God*. Yet, Augustine’s brief mention of deification as a source of joy is significant as those like David Meconi and Ryan Scruggs have sought to restore its significance in Augustine’s thought.³¹ Additionally, the relationship between deification and joy seems to be appropriate given that Augustine believes there to be progress or growth in a Christian’s experience of joy. For example, in his commentary on Psalm 64:10, Augustine suggests that the act of “rejoicing in the LORD” is an experience of Christ’s resurrection. This then raises the question of how believers today are to engage in this act of rejoicing in the LORD, to which Augustine responds, “he is delaying your recognition of him, so that when you recognise him it will be with *all the more joy*”.³²

Consequently, Augustine highlights that Christians have joy because of God’s greatness demonstrated through his power and authority over the demons, and because of God’s power and grace in giving people eyes to see, comprehend, and believe in order that they would become like him. Augustine discusses the significance of being God’s children in his commentary on Psalm 45, where he describes the crowning privilege as being immortality through Jesus Christ.³³ Therefore, the joy that the Lord gives provides security against both spiritual and physical threats.

REASON 2: GOD’S MERCY TO UNDESERVING SINNERS

Secondly, Augustine states that Christians have an ineffable joy because “the Lord will not reject his people”. This expression is not present in the Hebrew Bible and is thus absent in English translations. However, they are found in the Septuagint and Augustine’s Latin version.³⁴ Based on this, Augustine gives further reason for joy by discussing the hardness of heart among the Jews. To begin with, he highlights that God had not forgotten his chosen people of the Old Testament although Jesus Christ has come as the saviour and has instituted the new covenant. After all, he writes that “prophets were sent to it [the people

³⁰ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.6.

³¹ For example, Meconi writes that his “work will argue against much of previous scholarship to show that the deification of the human person is in fact a *central doctrine* in the overall thought of St Augustine.” See David Vincent Meconi, *The One Christ* (Catholic University of America Press, 2013), xi-xii ; Ryan L. Scruggs, “From Pilgrim to Perfect Man: Augustine’s Doctrine of Deification as Ecclesial Progress in *The City of God*,” *ARC* 44 (2016).

³² Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 64.17.

³³ “Who share with him? The children of men, because he is the Son of Man, who became a sharer in their mortality in order to make them sharers in his immortality” Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 44.21.

³⁴ Modern readers may object to Augustine’s interpretations given that the expression is absent in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, this point is still worth emphasising for at least two reasons. Firstly, Augustine’s sermons and commentaries were predominantly from the Latin translation of the Septuagint. Therefore, the inescapable reality is that his interpretations will inevitably carry additions or omissions from that textual tradition. Secondly, Augustine’s argument about Jewish inclusion is also prominent in his wider body of work, and in this case, significant in understanding the reasons for joy.

of God], prophets had themselves been born within it. To it were delivered and entrusted the words of God”.³⁵ Therefore, Augustine invites his listeners to rejoice because God has not abandoned, rejected, or cast out the Jews. Furthermore, Augustine shows that God’s redemptive action is accomplished by Jews such as the apostles and early converts. In particular, he argues “where would the apostle Paul himself have sprung from, he who was speaking in these passages and bore witness to the good olive tree by its fruit?”³⁶ Therefore, Augustine suggests that there is cause for joy because the coming of Christ does not exclude the people of the old covenant.

Augustine’s positive portrayal of the Jews in Psalm 95 continues to challenge criticisms by those such as Johannes van Oort and Brent Shaw, who suggest that Augustine’s sermons at best promote negative attitude towards the Jews and at worst fuels acts of violence against them.³⁷ Additionally, Augustine’s optimistic inclusion of the Jews in this Psalm reinforces Wendy Helleman’s argument that there is no overt racism or hatred towards Jews or Judaism in Augustine’s works.³⁸ Consequently, it comes as little surprise that a closer examination of Augustine’s reflection on this topic reveals not so much an interest (or disinterest) in the Jews as a group, but instead shows a deeper biblical and Gospel-shaped conviction that God does not cast out undeserving sinners. Augustine describes the Jews as those “who in their savagery had shed the Lord’s blood” and “the very people at whose hands Christ had been crucified”.³⁹ Nevertheless, despite their rebellion and rejection of Jesus Christ, the gift of salvation was still freely offered to them. The fruit of their conversion is clear as Augustine says that “all these thousands of people were *so thoroughly converted* that they sold their goods and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles”.⁴⁰ Therefore, even though the Jews were people of the old covenant and were culpable for the crucifixion of Christ, Augustine shows that even they can approach the Lord God and not be rejected.⁴¹

This Good News is amplified even further because Augustine also shows that the undeserving sinners in this case are not only the Jews who rejected Christ. Moreover, Augustine argues that those whom the Lord will not reject or cast out include the Gentiles. Therefore, although the Gentiles were not originally part of God’s people, Augustine states that Christ the cornerstone brings the two walls (Jews and Gentiles) together. More specifically, he says, “the Gentiles

³⁵ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.7.

³⁶ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.7.

³⁷ Johannes Van Oort, “Jews and Judaism in Augustine’s *Sermones*,” *Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia* 53 (2009). ; Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³⁸ Wendy Elgersma Helleman, “Casting out Hagar: anti-Judaism in the sermons of Augustine,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 51, no. 1 (2016): 34.

³⁹ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.7.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.7 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ A more detailed discussion about Augustine’s understanding of the relationship between Israel and the church can be found in Michael J. Vlach, “Rejection then hope: the church’s doctrine of Israel in the patristic era,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 19, no. 1 (Spr 2008).

too have come to the cornerstone, there to receive the kiss of peace; *they have come to this one Christ who has made one people out of two*, not like the heretic who have made two out of one.”⁴²

Consequently, the second cause for joy that Augustine highlights is that no one is too far from God’s grace. Christ the *sacerdos* (priest) and *sacrificium* (sacrifice) extends his kindness, forgiveness, and redemption even to the greatest of underserving sinners. God will not cast out either those who hung him on the cross or those who stood at a distance. Through Christ, all are brought near. The implications of salvation are manifold, and Augustine expands on this theme repeatedly all throughout the *Explanation of the Psalms*. Yet, a brief survey on the topic reveals that Augustine sees hope, particularly the hope of resurrection, as one of the primary fruits of salvation in Jesus Christ. According to Augustine, this hope is critical in providing resilience and perseverance in the midst of hardship. Furthermore, this hope is a cause for joy because it promises a future where happiness and safety are fully perfected.⁴³ Therefore, Augustine repeatedly invites his congregation to “rejoice in hope” because of their justification and the promise of the new creation.⁴⁴

REASON 3: GOD’S POWER OVER RULERS AND KINGS

Thirdly, Augustine states that Christians can have deep cause for joy because “his are the mountain peaks”. The landscape imagery arises out of Psalm 95:4, but Augustine believes that the Psalmist is communicating more than the fact that the Lord God is the creator of mountains and valleys. Significantly, Augustine states that “the mountain peaks are the grandees of the earth” – they are rulers, kings, and leaders of eminence.⁴⁵ More specifically, Augustine highlights that, “time was when these high and mighty folk, earthly potentates, *were hostile to the church*. They promulgated anti-Church laws and tried to blot out the Christian name from the earth”.⁴⁶ Therefore, more than just rulers and kings, the mountains specifically symbolise those within our culture with power and authority who use their might against the church. The extent of their social and political status is symbolised by the height of the mountains, and their strength and influence are paralleled by the imposing structure and presence of mountains.

⁴² Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.8.

⁴³ A fuller treatment of Augustine’s understanding between hope and joy can be found in his second sermon on Psalm 32. For the purposes of this essay, the following quote captures the way he sees hope as providing resilience and promise: “If you hope, you rejoice; if you are waiting with patience, you still groan; for there is no need for patience when you have no evil to put up with. What we call endurance, what we call patience, what we call bearing up, what we call steadfastness, has no place except amid misfortunes. Where you are hard pressed, there you feel the pinch. If we are still waiting in patience, we still have reason to say, *save me from those that hem me in*; but because we are saved in hope, we can say both these things simultaneously: *you make me dance with happiness*, and *save me*” Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 31[2].20 (emphasis added).

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 31.[2].21.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.8.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.8 (emphasis added).

Yet, despite their undeniable strength and might, Augustine suggests that this verse is a fulfilment of the prophecy in Psalm 71 (72):11 which says that “*all the kings of the earth will worship him*”. Hence, while the kings and mighty rulers of the earth continue to wield authority, some of which is used to oppress the church, Augustine concludes that the fact that “his are the mountain peaks” demonstrates that even the highest king and most powerful ruler ultimately submits to the Lord God.

As a result, Augustine emphasizes that Christians can have joy because even the most powerful and oppressive ruler stands accountable before the Lord God. This message is particularly pertinent during a time when political rulers and authorities are often portrayed as being oppressive, especially against Christians. For example, the recent Ezekiel Declaration which garnered close to 28,000 signatures from clergy and lay Christians warns against the government’s implementation of “vaccine passports”, particularly as a requirement for entry into churches.⁴⁷ Questions remain with regards to the timing, tone, and tenor of the Declaration. Additionally, other Christian groups and organisations have contested some of the Declaration’s claims.⁴⁸ However, regardless of the real or perceived oppression, Augustine states confidently that even the most wicked of governmental rulers remain under God’s power. Therefore, Christians can have joy because there is not one moment when the Lord God is out of control.

To be sure, this does not reduce the need for public engagement with governmental authorities, nor does it encourage passivity or silence. For example, Anthony Crescio persuasively argues against some of Rod Dreher’s more retreatist or separatist approach laid out in *The Benedict Option* and suggests that Augustine’s political theology equips the church to continue in its task of being on a rescue mission – to be in the world to bring as many as possible to unity in Christ.⁴⁹ Therefore, Augustine’s understanding of God’s rule over earthly kings and rulers positively fuels engagement rooted in a deep confidence that our governments are accountable before a higher heavenly court.

REASON 4: GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE EARTH

Fourthly, Augustine highlights that Christians have joy because “the sea is his, for he made it”. Once again, Augustine suggests that the Psalmist is communicating more than God’s providence over creation. In addition, Augustine states that “this world is a sea, but God made the sea too, and its

⁴⁷ “The Ezekiel Declaration,” Caldron Pool, accessed September 29, 2021, <https://caldronpool.com/ezekieldeclaration/>.

⁴⁸ “Why We Can’t Sign. Two Evangelical Ministers Respond to the Ezekiel Declaration,” The Gospel Coalition Australia, 2021, accessed September 29, 2021, <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-we-cant-sign-two-evangelical-ministers-respond-to-the-ezekiel-declaration/>; “A response to The Ezekiel Declaration,” Gospel, Society, and Culture, 2021, accessed September 29, 2021, <https://gsandc.org.au/a-response-to-the-ezekiel-declaration/>.

⁴⁹ Anthony Crescio, “An Augustinian Correction to a Faulty Option: The Politics of Salt and Light,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, no. 1 (2021): 71.

waves can only rage only as far as the shore, which he has assigned to it as its boundary”.⁵⁰ Augustine interprets the sea allegorically and suggests that it is a metaphor for the world that we live in, which includes challenges and troubles of many sorts.⁵¹ For example, he writes, “you are beset by trials, are you, and shaken by all the things in this world that offend you, even though you have taken your stand on God’s gracious promises?”⁵² Augustine acknowledges the tension that Christians experience as those who have trusted in God’s protection and provision through Jesus Christ while simultaneously living in a broken world where the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. He does not provide simplistic answers, nor does he seek to explain this tension away. Rather, Augustine points his audience to the undeniable reality that though the ‘sea’ or the world may be turbulent, it nevertheless comes under God’s sovereign hand. Therefore, while it may *feel* chaotic (and sea is appropriately a biblical symbol for chaos), the world remains firmly under God’s control – nothing goes beyond the boundaries which he has assigned. This was Augustine’s way of emphasising that there are no maverick molecules in a universe where God is sovereign.⁵³

Moreover, God’s sovereignty is demonstrated not only in his general providence over the broad contours of a Christian’s life. Augustine highlights that Christians can have deep joy because God is actively involved and sovereign in the details of our lives. He uses the reality of temptation as an example and suggests that these are used by God not to break us but to build us. More specifically, Augustine argues that God uses these experiences to refashion us. He states:

If you could dodge temptation, you would miss the refashioning. *But you are being refashioned, and if that is your situation, you must be in the craftsman’s hands.* He chips something off you here, and straightens something here; he smooths something else, and cleanses another part. He works with his own tools, and these tools are the troubles of this world.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94:9.

⁵¹ Augustine’s allegorical interpretation remains a contentious topic, especially among Reformed Evangelicals today. We have seen far too many forms of allegorical exegesis gone wrong and we are rightfully reserved about its application. However, Jason Byassee persuasively argues that 1) we are more allegorical in our exegesis than we think, 2) our focus on the *sensus literalis* may be robbing us from the understanding the riches of Scripture, and 3) we cannot be too quick to disregard allegory because we would not have patristic theology without patristic exegesis, which is unapologetically allegorical. Instead, he argues for a more controlled form of allegorical exegesis which he believes is demonstrated by Augustine. See Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

⁵² Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94:9.

⁵³ Sproul writes that “if there is one single molecule in this universe running around loose, totally free of God’s sovereignty, then we have no guarantee that a single promise of God will ever be fulfilled”. See R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2011), 16.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94:9 (emphasis added).

Therefore, Augustine states that the troubles and trials are not accidents, nor are they necessarily punishments. Instead, they are instruments which God uses to sanctify and shape us into the likeness of Christ. Augustine shows that the very experiences we fear such as tragedy and trials are purposeful.

CONCLUSION – COME LET US REJOICE!

An examination of the four reasons which Augustine gives for Christian joy demonstrates that his theology of joy is both eschatological and realistic. It is eschatological in the sense that each of these four reasons finds its ultimate fulfilment in the new creation – the heavenly city. The Lord God’s power over demons, while being decisively clear in his Christ’s death and resurrection, is not yet fully realised and the deification of God’s children is not yet complete. Therefore, prayerful dependence, alertness, and being on guard (1 Peter 5:8) are still necessary. The redemption of the full number of God’s elect is also not yet finished. Thus, mission, evangelism, and the bold preaching of the Gospel is still central to the Church’s mission. Earthly rulers, both wicked and just, continue to exercise their authority, sometimes in rebellion against God’s authority. Hence, Christians continue to rely on God’s wisdom to discern the occasions to obey (Romans 13:1-2) or object (Acts 5:29). Furthermore, there continues to be resistance to God’s created order both due to the effects of the fall and the sinful hearts of humanity. Thus, Christians continue to recognise the need for ongoing sanctification and sober acceptance of brokenness in the world. The full extent of Augustine’s vision of joy is not meant to be experienced now. Indeed, Stewart-Kroeker writes that the eschatological nature of Augustine’s theology of joy is an attempt to “mitigate an excessive fixation on earthly, temporal things.”⁵⁵

Nevertheless, Augustine’s theology of joy is still realistic and attainable. The eschatological vision equips believers to live by faith every single day. This vision does not only give us hope and something to look forward to at Christ’s return, it also helps us to interpret and make sense of our current experiences. It does not deny the existence of evil spiritual forces but asserts God’s dominance over them. It does not offer a universalist nor hyper-Calvinist understanding of sin and grace but emphasises the centrality of repentance and faith. It is not triumphalist in its view of public engagement but encourages cautious and sober discourse. It does not deny the reality of “righteous suffering” but helps us to understand its purpose and end.

Therefore, after presenting a grand vision of God and a rich picture of joy, Augustine concludes his sermon by inviting his audience to participate in this reality. Indeed, he urges his people, “so now do not be lazy or let your way of life and conduct keep you far away.”⁵⁶ Readers detect a tone of urgency

⁵⁵ Sarah Stewart Kroeker, “A Wordless Cry of Jubilation: Joy and the Ordering of the Emotions,” *Augustinian Studies* 50 (2019): 75.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.10.

as he appeals to his congregation to join in the chorus that shouts for joy by repenting and believing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Augustine makes it clear that those who experience the privilege of this indescribable joy are those who confess their sins, respond to God's grace in Jesus Christ, and rely on God for their joy to be made whole again. He says, "weep without fear in the presence of the God who made you, for he does not despise in you the work of his hands. Do not suppose that you can make good the damage yourself. You can collapse by yourself, but not restore yourself; only he who made you can remake you."⁵⁷

According to Augustine, the promise of Christian joy is the message and balm that soothes the aches and pains of living in a broken world. The clarity and centrality of Augustine's message is attested by his modelling – in how Augustine preaches this message. As noted earlier, Augustine i) intricately introduces the common human need for joy and stirs within his audience the longing for it, ii) he labours to challenge the many wrong sources that his congregation may be tempted to turn to for joy, and iii) he winsomely connects biblical and Gospel truths to the lived experience of his listeners. Augustine exemplifies the sort of "contextual communication" that Tim Keller encourages preachers to pursue at its finest form.⁵⁸ However, Augustine's pastoral heart is put on full display just moments before he expands on the four reasons for joy. He shows what makes good preachers great – a deep pastoral concern for his listeners. Just before he dives into the details of Psalm 95 and provides the reasons for Christian joy, Augustine describes his sermon as a debt. He recognises the limited time he has with them and the temptation to skim over that which the Psalmist goes in detail. Augustine states that, "if we were to discuss the meaning of all these separate declarations with proper care we should probably run out of time; but on the other hand, if we neglect them altogether we shall remain in your debt."⁵⁹

In the footnote on her translation of Augustine's meaning of debt, Maria Boulding comments that "Augustine will have cheated his hearers of what they have a right to expect. He frequently mentions the debt he owes them as their preacher, and their demands that he discharge it to the full."⁶⁰ Herein demonstrates the essential nature of a modern pastor's work. Upon recognising the brokenness of this world and anxiety of his congregation, Augustine does not decide to let them figure things out on their own. Instead, he is convinced that God's Word addresses these issues directly and recognises his role as a shepherd to be God's voice. Therefore, Augustine labours both in his

⁵⁷ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.10.

⁵⁸ Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2015).

⁵⁹ Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 94.5.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms: 73-98*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding, vol. 4 (New York: New City Press, 2002), 413.

modelling and message to ensure that his audience are not without the confidence and hope of the Gospel, and he sees it as his essential duty to communicate this in the clearest and most effective manner possible.

To be sure, this does not mean that pastors ought to have the same privileges as frontline or essential workers (though an argument could be made). It does, however, recover the necessary calling for pastors to lift the eyes of their congregations, that their visions may be fixed on heaven and to awaken their hearts that their loves would be centred on the Lord.⁶¹ To be sure, this calling is not limited to crisis situations like our current pandemic. However, these extreme circumstances uniquely highlight the realities of our fragile psychological wellbeing, physical safety, and eternity security. In the face of all these challenges, Augustine demonstrates that there are still real reasons for hope and joy. Therefore, preachers can with great confidence and joy echo Augustine and the Psalmist's invitation: *come let us rejoice!*

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⁶¹ A fuller treatment of how Augustine believers can attain and experience more joy can be found in Elliot Ku, "Reach, reflect, and rest: An invitation by St Augustine from Psalm 4," *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 27, no. 1 (2020).

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