

**Homilies on the
Gospel of John 41-124**

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THE WORKS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

A Translation for the 21st Century

Part III – Homilies

Volume 13: Homilies on the Gospel of John 41-124

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**Homilies on the
Gospel of John 41-124**

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CONTENTS

Homily 41	7
Homily 42	21
Homily 43	33
Homily 44	46
Homily 45	58
Homily 46	73
Homily 47	82
Homily 48	97
Homily 49	107
Homily 50	129
Homily 51	139
Homily 52	148
Homily 53	158
Homily 54	168
Homily 55	176
Homily 56	182
Homily 57	186
Homily 58	192
Homily 59	197
Homily 60	201
Homily 61	205
Homily 62	209
Homily 63	214
Homily 64	218
Homily 65	222
Homily 66	226
Homily 67	230
Homily 68	234
Homily 69	238
Homily 70	243
Homily 71	247
Homily 72	251
Homily 73	255
Homily 74	259
Homily 75	264
Homily 76	268
Homily 77	272
Homily 78	277
Homily 79	281
Homily 80	285
Homily 81	289

Homily 82	293
Homily 83	297
Homily 84	301
Homily 85	304
Homily 86	307
Homily 87	311
Homily 88	315
Homily 89	319
Homily 90	323
Homily 91	327
Homily 92	331
Homily 93	335
Homily 94	341
Homily 95	346
Homily 96	352
Homily 97	358
Homily 98	364
Homily 99	374
Homily 100	384
Homily 101	389
Homily 102	394
Homily 103	400
Homily 104	405
Homily 105	410
Homily 106	418
Homily 107	426
Homily 108	432
Homily 109	436
Homily 110	442
Homily 111	451
Homily 112	460
Homily 113	465
Homily 114	472
Homily 115	476
Homily 116	482
Homily 117	488
Homily 118	494
Homily 119	499
Homily 120	504
Homily 121	510
Homily 122	517
Homily 123	528
Homily 124	536

HOMILY 41

On John 8:31-36¹

Augustine recalls what was said in the previous sermon about truth and then about freedom

The other day I put off explaining the rest of the reading from the Holy Gospel that was read to us just now, because I had already said more than enough, and it would have been wrong to discuss the freedom into which we are called by the grace of our Savior in a careless and passing way; that is what I have decided to talk about with you today, with the help of the Lord.

Now those to whom the Lord Jesus Christ was talking were Jews, hostile to him for the most part, but some of them were already friends and others would become friends, for he saw, as I have already said, some who would become believers after his Passion. Looking at them, he had said, *When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am* (Jn 8:28). There were also some who believed right then, as he was speaking. It was to them that he addressed the words that we have heard today: *So then, Jesus went on to say to those Jews who believed him, If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples* (Jn 8:31). You will be so by remaining, for, because you are now believers, by remaining you will be those who see.² Hence he continues, *And you will come to know the truth* (Jn 8:32).

Truth is unchangeable. Truth is bread, it nourishes minds and isn't diminished.³ It changes the one who eats; it isn't changed into the one who eats. This truth is the Word of God, God with God, the only-begotten Son. This truth is clothed with flesh for our sake, so that he might be born of the Virgin Mary and might fulfill the prophecy: *Truth has sprung from the earth* (Ps 85:11). So, when this truth was talking to the Jews, he was hidden in flesh, but he wasn't hidden so as to be denied but so that

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1. Preached only a few days after Homily 40.
 2. See Homily 40, 9; Sermon 134, 1. Augustine is referring to the vision of God.
 3. "It nourishes minds and isn't diminished": *mentes reficit nec deficit*. See Homilies 13, 5; 25, 13; 26, 1; Sermons 28, 2; 130, 2; 179, 5.

recognition would be deferred; it was deferred so that he might suffer in the flesh; he suffered in the flesh so as to redeem the flesh of sin.⁴

Accordingly, standing there in the weakness of the flesh for all to see, and hidden as far as his divine majesty was concerned, our Lord Jesus Christ said to those who had come to believe in him while he was speaking, *If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples* (Mt 10:22), for the one who perseveres to the end is the one who will be saved. *And you will know the truth*, who is now hidden from you and is talking to you, *and the truth will deliver you* (Jn 8:32). The Lord took this word, *deliver*, from “freedom,”⁵ for to deliver is nothing other than to make free. Just as to save is the same as making safe, and to heal is the same as making healthy, and to enrich is the same as making rich, so to deliver is the same as making free. This meaning is more evident with the Greek word. For it is customary in Latin to talk about deliverance only in relation to health and not in relation to freedom; we usually talk about someone being set free from an illness; that is customary, but it isn’t the proper usage. The Lord used this phrase, *And the truth will deliver you*, in such a way that in the Greek language no one would doubt that he was referring to making people free.

The frequent enslavement of Israel

2. That is how the Jews, too, understood it. *And they answered him*—not those who had already come to believe but those in the crowd who weren’t yet believers—*they answered him, We are the seed of Abraham, and we have never been slaves to anyone. How can you say, You will be delivered?* (Jn 8:33) But the Lord hadn’t said “You will be delivered” but *The truth will deliver you*. In that phrase, however, all that they understood was deliverance, because, as I said, it is quite plain in Greek. So they boasted about being the seed of Abraham and said, *We are the seed of Abraham, and we have never been slaves to anyone. How can you say, You will be delivered?*

O bloated flesh! This is not greatness but tumescence. Did you say truly, even according to the liberty of this earthly time, *We have never been*

4. See Rom 8:3.

5. “Deliver...freedom”: *liberabit...libertas*.

slaves to anyone? Wasn't Joseph sold?⁶ Weren't holy prophets led off into captivity? And in any case, wasn't this the people who were making bricks in Egypt and were slaving away for harsh kings, working in mud and not even working on silver and gold?⁷ If you have never been slaves to anyone, you ungrateful people, how is it that God so constantly claims that he delivered you from the house of bondage?⁸ Would you perhaps say that your fathers were slaves while you who are now speaking have never been slaves to anyone? How, then, were you still paying tribute to the Romans, whence you proposed to set a snare to catch even truth itself, so that you said, *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?* (Mk 12:14), so that if he had said that it was lawful, you would have caught him out as being ill-disposed to the liberty of the seed of Abraham, while, if he had said that it wasn't lawful, you would have charged him before the rulers of the earth with forbidding the payment of taxes to rulers? Rightly were you defeated when you produced a coin and were forced to answer your own deceitful question, for when you had responded that the coin had the image of Caesar on it, you were told, *Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's* (Mk 12:17), because, just as Caesar looks for his image on coins, so God looks for his own in human beings.⁹ This was his response, then, to the Jews. The useless pride of those who lied about their own liberty, which they understood in such a fleshly way, by saying, *We have never been the slaves of anyone*, offends me, brothers and sisters.

The meaning and purpose of Amen

3. But let us listen with greater attention to what the Lord responded here, lest we too discover that we are slaves, for Jesus answered them, *Amen, amen, I say to you that everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin* (Jn 8:34). He is a slave; would that it were of man and not of sin! Who wouldn't tremble at these words? May the Lord our God grant us, that is, both me and you, that on behalf of these words¹⁰ I may speak

6. See Gn 37:28.

7. See Ex 1:13-14.

8. See Ex 20:2; Dt 5:6; 13:5.10.

9. See Sermons 113A, 8; 303A, 7.

10. I.e., on behalf of Jn 8:34 (*Amen, amen, I say to you...*).

about the liberty to be sought and the slavery to be avoided. Truth says, *Amen, amen, I say to you*. What does it mean when the Lord our God says, *Amen, amen, I say to you*? He is strongly emphasizing whatever he begins in that way. In some way, if I may say so, *Amen, amen, I say to you* is his oath. In fact *amen* means “true,” and yet it wasn’t translated, although it could have been put down as “Truly I tell you.” Neither the Greek nor the Latin translator dared to do this; this word, *amen*, is actually neither Greek nor Latin but Hebrew. That’s how it stayed; it wasn’t translated, so that it might be honored with the veil of secrecy, not to deny it but so that it might not be cheapened by being uncovered.¹¹ And yet it wasn’t just once but twice that the word was uttered by the Lord: *Amen, amen, I say to you*. Understand from the repetition itself how important this emphasis is.

To be a slave of sin is worse than being a slave of a human master

4. What, then, is being emphasized? *Truly, truly, I say to you*, says truth, who of course couldn’t possibly lie even if he hadn’t said *Truly, I say*. Still, he emphasizes the point, insists on it; somehow he rouses sleepers, makes them attentive, and refuses to be ignored. What does he say? *Amen, amen, I say to you that everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin*.

O wretched slavery! Many slaves who suffer at the hands of bad masters claim the right to be put up for sale, seeking at least a change of masters, not freedom from every master.¹² What is a slave of sin to do? To whom can he appeal? Before whom can he plead? Before whom can he ask to be sold? Then again, a man’s slave, worn out by the harshness of his master’s commands, sometimes tries to run away.¹³ Where can the slave of sin run? Wherever he runs, he drags himself along with himself. A bad conscience cannot escape itself, there is nowhere it can go, it fol-

11. “Deny...uncovered”: *negatum...nudatum*.

12. A judgment of the emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161) required harsh masters to sell any slave who took refuge in a temple or beside any statue of the emperor. Constantine (306-337) extended the measure to those who fled to a church.

13. Runaway slaves were liable to severe penalties if caught. If they took refuge in a church, they might get the bishop to require their masters to grant them their freedom by a formal act of manumission in the bishop’s presence.

lows itself; rather, it never leaves itself, for the sin that has been committed is within. He committed a sin so as to have some bodily pleasure; the pleasure passes, the sin remains. What was enjoyed has come to an end; something vexing remains. An evil slavery indeed!

Sometimes people take refuge in a church, and frequently we put up with them as undisciplined people who want no master but don't want to do away with their sins. But sometimes those who have been enslaved wrongfully and dishonestly find refuge in a church because they are free persons being held in slavery, and they appeal to the bishop; and if he doesn't go to endless trouble to put right this suppression of freedom, he is considered merciless.¹⁴

Let us all take refuge in Christ, let us make our appeal against sin to God the liberator, let us ask to be put up for sale, to be redeemed by his blood. For the Lord says, *You were sold for nothing, and without money you shall be redeemed* (Is 52:3), that is, without payment by you, because I have paid. The Lord says this, for he paid the price not in money but in his blood. We, indeed, have remained both enslaved and in need.

How to be reconciled with God

5. Only the Lord, then, can deliver from this slavery; only the one who was not subjected to it can deliver from it, for he is the only one who came in this flesh without sin.¹⁵ For infants whom you see being carried in their mothers' arms don't yet walk, and they are already in shackles, for from Adam they brought with them what will be shattered by Christ. The grace which the Lord promises will also be theirs when they are baptized, because he alone, who came without sin and became a sacrifice for sin, can deliver from sin.

When the Apostle was being read, you heard: *We are ambassadors for Christ*, he says, *as if God were pleading through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf*, that is, as though Christ were imploring you. To what

14. Augustine himself went to endless trouble in such cases and expected his colleagues to do the same. See Letter 10, to Alypius, asking him, while at the imperial court in Ravenna, to press the authorities there to act against the slave trading in the North African Provinces that supplied slaves for Europe.

15. See Homilies 4, 10; 36, 2; Sermons 27, 2; 69, 4; 134, 4; 143, 1; 152, 8.