

YOU CONVERTED ME

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The Confessions of St. Augustine

A Modernized Christian Classic

by Augustine of Hippo

Modernized translation by Robert J. Edmonson, CJ
Introduction and notes by Rev. Tony Jones



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Introduction

I think it has the makings of a great movie, a classic coming-of-age story. . . .

A boy grows into a man, getting into the kind of mischief that a lot of boys do (messing around with girls, stealing, getting in trouble at school). Meanwhile, his overprotective Christian mother prays fervently for the salvation of his soul, and his unspiritual father pays him little interest. The young man joins a weird, vegetarian cult, and he has a son with his girlfriend.

The young man then flees his mother to study in the big city where he's at once enthralled and disgusted by the parties and carousing around him. All the while, he's tortured internally by his conscience as he searches for "The Truth," worrying that he's going to die before he finds it and as a result be banished to hell. He moves to another city where he falls under the sway of two great Christian men who show him great love and patience, even as he dabbles in another religion.

Finally, accompanied by his best friend, he's driven by his own tormented soul into a garden, where he frantically paces the paths, attacked from all sides by anxiety. He hears the mysterious voice of a child beckoning him, "Take up and read, take up and read," so he returns to the bench where his friend is sitting and opens the biblical book of Romans. He reads one verse, the one that he happens to glance at first, and immediately, calm overcomes his troubled heart, and twenty years worth of doubts suddenly vanish. The young man and his friend run back to his mother. He tells her of his conversion to Christ, and they embrace in joy and weeping.

The Life of Augustine

Quite a story, isn't it? And it's made all the more powerful by the fact that it was written over 1,600 years ago by Aurelius Augustinus, better known as St. Augustine of Hippo, probably the most important theologian in the history of Western Christianity. Augustine was born in the year 354 in the North African town of Tagaste. He was raised by his devoutly Christian (and somewhat overbearing!) mother, Monica, and his pagan father, Patricius, in the city of Carthage. That's where he received his education in rhetoric, which is the study of speech and persuasion.

At age seventeen, in Carthage, Augustine was studying and also partying. He called that city a “cauldron of illicit loves,” and he referred to his friends, with whom he often visited the theater, as “the wreckers.” During that year, he fell in love with a woman whom he never married, and whose name we don’t know. It’s sad not to know much about her, because clearly Augustine grew to love her more and more over the years. While they never officially married, they had what today we would call a “common-law marriage.”

The next year, when Augustine was eighteen, the young couple had a son, whom they named Adeodatus, which means “God-given.” Also that year, Augustine’s father died—he was baptized on his deathbed, something many in that time believed would gain him admittance into heaven.

That year, 372, was also a big year for Augustine because he joined the religion of Manicheism. Manicheus, the founder of the religion, lived in Persia (present day Iraq and Iran) from about 210 to about 277. The two other religions in that area of the world that were growing at the time were Christianity and Zoroastrianism, and Manicheus took elements from both into his religious system. He claimed to be the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus in the New Testament, and he founded a religion most notable for its *dualism*. That is, Manicheans (and you might pick this up in Augustine’s writings) believed that everything in the world was divided up between good and bad,

light and dark. For instance, they believed that vegetables (and all green things) were good, but meat (and red things) were bad; so, obviously, they were vegetarians.

But over his eight or nine years as a Manichean, Augustine became more and more troubled by the teaching of this religion. You'll see in the pages that follow that Augustine was truly a tortured soul until he converted to Christianity. At first, Manicheism helped him to understand all of his sinful desires, because he could blame them on his body, which Manicheans taught was ultimately an evil, material creation. But as time passed, he became less content with these answers, and he started to search for truth elsewhere.

At age twenty, Augustine, his common-law wife, and Adeodatus returned first to Tagaste (where his mother would not let him in the house because he was a Manichean) and then to Carthage, where he opened his own school of rhetoric and continued his study of the Manichean religion. He stayed there for nine years, but several friends wrote him letters, urging him to return to Rome, the capital of the empire—that's where the action was. The little family of three did move, but they snuck away, not telling Monica that they were going!

Just a year after arriving in Rome, Augustine was appointed to a prime teaching post in Milan, a city in northern Italy. By that point, he was truly disillusioned with the religion of Manicheus, and he left

it. Instead, he began to study Neoplatonism. This philosophical-religious system taught that there was no such thing as evil in the world, only beings that had attained different levels of perfection. The more that a person could rid himself of bodily appetites (like sex, food, and drink), the more perfection he could attain, and the more perfection he could attain, the more divine he could become. This was an optimistic outlook, and it greatly appealed to Augustine after all of the negativity of Manicheism.

But Augustine came under another influence in Milan, and that was Ambrose, the Christian bishop of that city. Although Augustine writes that the great Ambrose really didn't have time to meet with him for a chat, the still-young Augustine attended church almost every Sunday to hear the bishop speak. At first, Augustine was impressed with Ambrose's rhetorical talent, then with the fact that such a wise man could be a Christian. Finally, Augustine was persuaded by the brilliance of the bishop's sermons that Christianity, in fact, was logical and understandable.

As you will see in the pages that follow, everything came to a head for Augustine in Milan. He realized that his previous religious commitments were falsehood. His mother had pressured him to leave his common-law wife and son to marry a good, Christian girl (but, instead, he started sleeping with another woman!), and he had become convinced

that even his career as a public speaker was a farce. In the end, he converted to Christianity, or, as he says it in a prayer to Christ, “You converted me.” I don’t particularly want to summarize that moment—it’s so beautiful that I want you to read it for yourself. And, trust me, it’s worth the wait. . . .

Augustine went on to live a long and productive life, even after the tragic deaths of his mother, son, and close friends. He never married or had any more children, but moved back to Hippo, a town in northern Africa, and established a monastery there. He spent the rest of his life writing some of the most powerful and compelling Christian theology and philosophy that’s ever been written. When he died in 430 at the age of seventy-six, he had preached over 500 sermons, written 240 letters, and authored over 100 books.

The Confessions

What you’re about to read was unprecedented at the time—in fact, this book is the first known autobiography ever written in the Western world. It’s not really a diary or a journal, but more of a memoir. It traces Augustine’s life from his birth through the age of thirty-three. (While it may sound strange that it covers Augustine’s birth because, of course, he couldn’t remember it, he does write about it, for it greatly interests him. You

see, there were many skeptical philosophers in his day, just like today, who said that we, as human beings, can't know anything with certainty. Augustine argued that although he couldn't remember his birth, he could say with certainty that his parents were his parents. You'll see that he also writes a lot about the fact that his mother cared for him before he could give her any affection back, and he compares this to how God cared for him before he converted to Christianity.)

But, as I was saying, it's an autobiography, and it's written in thirteen "books." The first eight are in this volume, and they take us through his conversion at age thirty-one. Augustine actually didn't start writing the *Confessions* until he was forty-six, and it took him a couple of years to complete the work. When you read his detailed accounts of things that happened to him and how he felt when he was a teenager, you'll discover one of the most amazing aspects of this book and of Augustine's mind: He had an incredible memory. As scholars have studied this book over the centuries, they've been dazzled by Augustine's recall of events.

But why is it called the *Confessions*? Well, first off, because Augustine spends a lot of time confessing his sins in this book, most especially the sins he committed before he became a Christian. You'll see, for instance, a famous section in which he goes on at some length wondering what led him to steal pears from an orchard when he was a boy.

But the reason that he confesses his sins in these pages isn't to cleanse his soul, for he knows that his soul has already been cleansed by his confessing his sins to God and by the love of Christ. No, he confesses his sins in print so that he can make the same point over and over: In spite of Augustine's sinful ways, God had his hand on young Augustine all along. That's why, at many points, Augustine quits telling his story and virtually breaks out in song to God. A related point is that Augustine is sure that God heard the prayers of his faithful mother, Monica, all those years of his wayward youth.

Not only is Augustine confessing his sins, but also he's confessing to the world his faith in Christ. And, most important, he's confessing his love for God. The *Confessions*, in fact, are written to God, as is seen in a famous line from the second paragraph: “. . . our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Reading Tips

What may be most striking to you as you read this book is how you've experienced many of the same things that Augustine recounts about his years as a child, a teenager, and a young adult. He does naughty things, hangs out with the wrong group of friends, fools around sexually, steals stuff, and causes his mother lots of grief. But more important than *what he does* is *how he feels*. In fact,

you may want to pay special attention to what he writes about how he feels, for you may know exactly what he's talking about.

But for all the similarities, it's also important to remember that this book is from another time. An "anachronism" is an artifact, person, or word that seems to belong to another time, and there are indeed some of those in this book. You'll notice, for instance, that Augustine believes that women are physically and psychologically weaker than men, the "frail sex." While we call this sexism today, in Augustine's time, it was commonly thought to be true. When it comes to items like this, I've often written a little note meant to help you get over the hurdle of a strange phrase or obscure reference.

I've also placed notes around some concepts that may be hard to follow, and I try to tip you off a few times when Augustine makes a sharp turn in his writing without using his blinker. Other things that you may be unsure of will come up in the text—if it's a word you've never seen, I strongly encourage you to look it up (you may see it on the SAT!), and if it's a strange name or an obscure reference, write a note in the back of the book and Google it later.

Finally, if you're anything like me, it takes you a while to get into the language when you start reading a Shakespearean play. Well, the same goes here: Just power through the first three or four pages, and you'll start to get the hang of it. You can always go back and read them again later. Remember that

Augustine is writing with God as the intended audience, and that he will occasionally break into explicit (and beautiful) prayers. And feel free to read this book with a pen or a highlighter in your hand to underline some of the beautiful, poignant, and powerful things that Augustine wrote more than sixteen centuries ago.

Tony Jones
Edina, Minnesota

Chapter One

Infancy to Age Fifteen

“**L**ord, you are great, and most worthy of praise” (Psalm 48:1). “Your power is mighty, and your understanding has no limit” (Psalm 147:5). We want to praise you; we—who are only small particles of your creation—yes, we, though with us we carry our mortality, the evidence of our sin, the evidence that you resist the proud. We are only particles of your creation, but in spite of that we praise you.

You awake us to delight in your praise; for you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

Allow me, Lord, to know and understand which of these is most important: to call on you or to praise you. And again: to know you or to call on you. For who can call on you without knowing you? One who doesn't know you might call on you

as if you were other than you are. Or do we perhaps call on you so that we may know you? “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? . . . And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Romans 10:14).



When you see quotation marks, most often they show a quote from the Bible. They may also indicate a quote from a poet.

And “Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice” (Psalm 105:3). Because those who seek will find him, and those who find will praise him. Let me seek you, Lord, by calling on you, and call on you believing in you, because someone has preached you to us. My faith calls on you, Lord: the faith you’ve given me, the faith you’ve breathed into me through your Son’s being born in the flesh, through the ministry of the preacher.

But how will I call on my God, my God and Lord? Because when I call on him, I ask him to come to me. And what room is there in me, where my God can come—God who made heaven and earth? Is there anything in me, Lord, my God, that can contain you? Do heaven and earth—which you’ve made, and in which you made me—contain you? Or, since nothing could exist without you, does everything that exists contain you? Why, then, do I ask that you come into me, since I, too, exist—I who couldn’t exist if you weren’t in me? Why do I say this? Because even if I were in hell, you would

be there as well. For “if I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (Psalm 139:8). I couldn’t exist then, my God, couldn’t exist at all, unless you were in me. Or should I say, I couldn’t exist unless I were in you, “from whom and through whom and to whom are all things” (Romans 11:36).

Even so, Lord, even so. Where do I call you to come, since I’m in you? Or from where can you enter into me? Where, beyond heaven and earth, could I go that my God, who has said, “I fill heaven and earth” (Jeremiah 23:24), might come into me?



Remember in the introduction when I said that you might have to power through the first few pages? Well, I’m back to give you a pep talk. This opening section is a long string of rhetorical questions; that is, questions that don’t really have answers. Rather than getting bogged down in them, just keep reading and try to get a feel for what Augustine is doing.

Do heaven and earth then contain you, since you fill them? Or, do you fill them and yet overflow, since they can’t contain you? And where, when heaven and earth are filled, do you pour out what remains of yourself? Or, is there no need for you who contain all things to be contained by anything, since those things you fill, you fill by containing them?

The vessels that you fill don’t sustain you, since even if they were broken, you wouldn’t be poured out. And when you’re poured out on us, you’re not cast down, but we’re lifted up. You’re not dispersed,

but we're drawn together. But as you fill all things, do you also fill them with your whole self? Or, since all things can't contain you completely, do they contain part of you? Do they all contain the same part at once, or does each have its own proper part—with greater things having more, and smaller things having less? If this is so, then is one part of you greater, and another part of you less? Or are you completely everywhere, while nothing may completely contain you?

What are you then, my God—what, but the Lord God? “For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God?” (Psalm 18:31). Most high, most excellent, most powerful, most mighty, most merciful, and most just; most hidden, but most present; most beautiful, and most strong; stable, but mysterious; unchangeable, but changing all things; never new, never old; making all things new and bringing age upon the proud, though they don't know it; ever working, but ever at rest; still gathering, but lacking nothing; sustaining, filling, and protecting; creating, nourishing, and maturing; seeking, but possessing all things.

You love without passion; you're jealous without anxiety; you repent, but have no sorrow; you're angry, but serene; you change your ways, but your plans are unchanged; you recover what you find, having never lost it; you're never in need, but you rejoice in gain; you're never covetous, but you require interest. You receive over and above, so that you may owe—yet who has anything that isn't

yours? You pay debts, but you owe nothing; you remit debts, but you lose nothing. And what have I now said, my God, my life, my holy One—what is this I have said? Or what does anyone say when they speak of you? Nevertheless, those who keep silent should be on their guard, since those who say the most are like those who can't speak.

Oh, how will I find rest in you? Who will send you into my heart to flood it, so that I may forget my troubles and embrace you, my only good? What are you to me? In your pity, teach me to speak. What am I to you that you demand my love, and if I don't give it, you are angry with me and threaten me with great sorrows? Is it then, a slight sorrow not to love you? Oh, no! For your mercies' sake, Lord my God, tell me what you are to me. "Say to me, 'I am your salvation'" (Psalm 35:3). When I hear this word, let me run and lay hold of you. Don't hide your face from me. Let me see it, even if I die, for I surely will die if I don't see it.

The house of my soul is narrow. Enlarge it, so that you may enter it. It's in ruins! Repair it! It has things in it that would offend your eyes. I confess and know it. But who will cleanse it, or to whom will I cry, but to you? Lord, forgive my willful sins (Psalm 19:13) and spare your servant from the hands of the enemy (Psalm 31:8). "I trusted in the LORD when I [spoke]" Psalm 116:10. Lord, you know. Haven't I confessed my transgressions to you, and you, my God, have forgiven the guilt of my sin? (Psalm 31:5). I don't want to dispute with

you, who are the Truth (Job 9:3, John 14:6). I'm afraid to deceive myself, because my gross immorality might lie against itself. So I don't want to dispute with you, because "If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3).



OK, you made it. Now stop, take a breath, and think back—what do you think that Augustine was up to with all of those questions?

But allow me to speak before your mercy, me—"dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). Allow me to speak, for I speak to your mercy and not to the contempt of others. Perhaps you too despise me, but when you turn to me, you'll have compassion on me. For what would I say, Lord my God, but that I don't know where I came from into this—should I call it *dying life*, or *living death*? But, as I was told by my earthly parents, out of whose substance you fashioned me (I don't remember it), the comforts of your compassion sustained me. Then I received the comfort of human milk; my mother and my nurses didn't fill their own breasts, but you gave the nourishment of my infancy through them, according to your rules and that liberal generosity of yours that lies beneath all things.

You also caused me to want no more than you provided. And those who nourished me gave me willingly what you gave them, for they, with a heaven-taught affection, willingly gave me what

you had abundantly supplied. It was good for them that my good should come from them, though in truth it wasn't really *from* them but *by* them, for all good things are from you, God, and all my health comes from you. This is what I've learned since you declared yourself to me through your blessings, both those that are within me and those that are outside of me, which you've given to me. At one time I only knew how to suck, to be satisfied when comfortable, and to cry when in pain—nothing more.



Augustine is writing about his own infancy, not because he can remember it, but because he has seen many infants and can assume that he was similar to them.

Afterward I began to smile, first when I was sleeping, then when I was awake. I was told this about myself, and I believe it, for we see the same thing in other infants. So, little by little, I realized where I was and wanted to express my desires to those who could satisfy them, since I couldn't! And that's because my wants were inside me and they were outside me, and couldn't by any faculty of their own enter my soul. So I randomly flung around my arms and legs and my voice, making the few signs that I could, suggesting (though very inadequately) by signs or sounds what it was I wanted. And when I wasn't feeling satisfied—because what I wanted either wasn't understood or wasn't good for me—I got annoyed at my elders

and angry with those who didn't owe me anything, because they weren't serving me, and I took revenge on them by crying. That's how I've learned infants to be by watching them, and I've found out that I was the same way myself.

But I was an infant a long time ago, and yet I live on. But you, Lord, live forever and in you nothing dies, since before the foundation of the world and before all that can be called "before," you are, and you are God and Lord of all that you've created. With you, who are unchanging forever, live the first causes of all things that pass away, the unchanging sources of all things that change, the eternal reasons of all things that lack reason and are limited by time.

Tell me, Lord, I who humbly and earnestly ask you. You who are all-merciful, tell your miserable one—tell me: Did my infancy follow another age of mine that died before it? Was it in another age that I spent within my mother's womb? I've heard something about that and I've seen pregnant women for myself. And then what about before that life, God, my joy? Was I anywhere or anybody? No one can tell me this—not my father or mother, not experience, not other people, not my own memory. Perhaps you laugh at me for asking such things, and you invite me to praise you and acknowledge you for what I do know.



Do we exist before we are conceived in our mother's body? Augustine asks this question here, but he admits that we can never know the answer.

I give you thanks, Lord of heaven and earth, and praise you for my first being and my infancy, about which I remember nothing. You've appointed that humankind should learn much about themselves from others and believe many things on the authority of frail women.



Like me, you may cringe when you see Augustine refer to women as "frail." He's not being sexist, exactly, because in his day it was commonly believed that women were more emotional and therefore psychologically and physically weaker than men. Thankfully, we know better than that today, but Augustine was a product of his times, so I suggest we give him the benefit of the doubt here.

Even then I had life and being, and at the close of my infancy I was already looking for ways to make my feelings known to others. Where could such a creature come from, Lord, but from you, or will any of us be skillful enough to create ourselves? Or can any stream be found anywhere else that brings being and life into us, except this, that you, Lord, have made us, with whom being and life are one, because you're supremely being and life? For you are most high and you don't change.

And today doesn't come to a close in you, and yet it does come to a close in you, because all such

things are also in you. For they would have no way even to pass away unless you sustained them. And since “the heavens . . . will perish, but you remain” (Psalm 101:25-26), your years are like an ever-present today. How many of our years and our fathers’ years have flowed away through your today, and received from it their measure and shape of being? And still others to come will receive the shape of their degree of being and will pass away. But you’re still the same, and all tomorrows and what is beyond them, and all yesterdays and what is behind them, you make to be in your today. What does it matter to me, even if none of us can understand this? Let’s still be glad and say, “What is this?” (Exodus 16:15). Let’s be content by not understanding to find you, rather than by understanding not to find you.

Hear me, God! It’s only because of the sin of humankind that we speak this way, and you have compassion on us, for you made us, but you didn’t make sin in us. Who reminds me of the sins of my infancy? For in your sight, no one is free from sin, not even the infant who has lived for only one day upon the earth (see Job 14:1–4).

Who reminds me? Doesn’t each little infant in whom I see what I don’t remember about myself? What was my sin then? Is it that I cried for the breast? For if I were to cry that way now for food suitable to my present age, I would be laughed at and scolded. What I did then deserved scolding, but since I couldn’t understand scolding, custom

and reason prevented people from scolding me. For as we grow, we root out and cast away such habits.

Now, even if a person prunes trees or bushes, no one knowingly throws away what is good. Or was it good then, even for a time, to cry for what, if it were given to me, would be hurtful—to bitterly resent that those free persons, elders—even my own parents who gave me birth—didn't serve me? That many others besides, wiser than I, didn't obey the beckoning of my good pleasure? That I did my best to strike and hurt because my commands weren't obeyed, commands that would have been only harmful to me if they'd been carried out? Then in the weakness of an infant's body, not its will, lies its innocence.

I've seen and known an infant to be jealous, even though it couldn't speak. It turned pale and looked bitterly at its foster-brother. Who doesn't know this to be true? Mothers and nurses tell you that they appease these things by all kinds of remedies. Is it innocence when the fountain of milk is flowing in rich abundance, not to allow another to share it, though the other one needs the nourishment to sustain its life? We look leniently on all this, not because we fail to recognize the presence and degree of the evils, but because they will disappear as age increases. For although they are allowed in infancy, the very same tempers are utterly intolerable when they appear in an older person.

Lord my God, who gave life to my infancy by furnishing the body you gave me with senses,

knitting its limbs together, shaping its proportions and implanting in me all the impulses necessary for maintaining the integrity and safety of a living being—you command me to praise you in these things, “to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High” (Psalm 92:1). For you are God, almighty and good, even if you had done nothing but these things that no one but you could do. You alone made all things, most Fair One, and you make all things fair; and by your law you order all things.

This period of my life, then, Lord, of which I have no memory, which I take on others’ word and which I guess from observing other infants—true though the guess may be—I don’t care to reckon as a part of my life that I live in this world. For it’s hidden from me in the shadows of forgetfulness no less than the time I spent in my mother’s womb. But if “I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5), where, I pray, my God, where, Lord, or when, was I, your servant, innocent? But I pass that period by. What do I now have to do with that period of which I have no memories?



One of Augustine’s major contributions to Christian theology was the doctrine of Original Sin, and you see it in this paragraph. This is the (somewhat controversial) belief that, because of the sin of Adam and Eve, all human beings are born sinful and in need of salvation before they even commit a sin of their own.

Passing on from infancy, I came to boyhood, or rather it came to me. My infancy didn't depart (where did it go?) and yet it was no more. For I was no longer a speechless infant, but a chattering boy. This I do remember, and I've since observed how I learned to speak.

My elders didn't teach me words by any particular method (as a little later they taught me other things). But when I was unable to say all I wanted and to whomever I wanted by whimpering and broken sounds and various gestures that I used to enforce my wishes, I myself began to repeat the sounds in my memory according to the understanding that you, my God, gave me. When they called anything by name and turned toward it as they spoke, I saw and gathered that the object they were pointing out was called by that name. And I understood by their gestures that they meant this thing and nothing else, movements that are the natural language, so to speak, of all peoples, expressed by facial expressions, glances of the eyes, movements of the arms and legs, and tones of the voice, indicating the feelings of the mind as it searches for, gets, rejects or avoids certain things.

And so by frequently hearing words as they occurred in various sentences, I gradually gathered what they meant. Having formed my mouth to make these sounds, I could then give voice to my will. Therefore I exchanged with those about me these current expressions of our wants, and so advanced deeper into the stormy fellowship of

human life, still subject to parental authority and the bidding of my elders.

God, my God! What miseries and mockeries I now experienced, when obedience to my teachers was set before me as proper to my boyhood so that I might prosper in this world and excel in the knowledge of speech that would gain the praise of other people and deceitful riches. After that, I was put in school to get learning, the usefulness of which I couldn't imagine (useless as I was), and yet if I was idle in my studies, I was flogged! For our ancestors considered this to be the right way, and many, passing the same way before us, had laid out the weary paths through which we were obliged to pass, multiplying labor and grief on the children of Adam.

But, Lord, we found that people prayed to you, and we learned from them to think of you according to our abilities, to be some Great One who, though hidden from our senses, could hear and help us. So I began, even as a boy, to pray to you, my help and refuge. And I let my tongue freely call on you, praying to you, even though I was small, with no small earnestness, that I might not be flogged at school. And when you didn't hear me, my elders, yes, my own parents who certainly wished me no harm, laughed at my small wounds, which at that point were a source of great and grievous distress to me.



Have you ever sent up a quick prayer before a pop quiz at school? Well, Augustine did, too, but it was usually just before he was about to be flogged!!!

Is there anyone, Lord, who is bound to you with such greatness of soul and with so strong an affection (there is a sort of stupidity that may do that much)—is there anyone who is endowed with so great a courage from clinging devoutly to you, that they can think lightly of racks and hooks and other tortures? For throughout the whole world people pray fervently to be saved from such tortures. Can they ridicule people who are afraid of them as bitterly as our parents ridiculed the torments that we suffered from our teachers in boyhood? For we didn't fear our torments any less, nor did we pray less to you to escape them. And yet we sinned in writing, reading, or studying less than was required of us. For we weren't short on memory or ability, Lord, of which, by your will, we possessed enough for our age. But the only thing we took great pleasure in was playing, and for this we were punished by those who were doing the same things themselves.



A psychologist might say that Augustine is showing some repressed anger from childhood here, basically saying, “All I wanted to do was play, but they spanked me unjustly!”

But older people's idleness is called business, while boys who do the same are punished by those same elders; and yet no one expresses pity, either

boys or adults. For will any one of good sense approve of my being whipped because as a boy I played ball, and so I made less progress in studies than I was to learn only so that, as a man, I might play more shameful games? And what else was my tutor doing who beat me, who, if he was defeated in some trifling controversy with his fellow tutor, was more bitter and angry than I was when I was beaten in a game of ball by a playmate?

And yet I sinned in this, Lord God, Creator and Disposer of all things in nature (but of sin only the Disposer). Lord my God, I sinned acting against the commands of my parents and of my teachers. For what they, with whatever motive, wanted me to learn, I might have put to good use later on. But I disobeyed, not because I had chosen a better way, but from love of playing. I loved having the honor of victory in my contests, and of having my ears tickled with fables so that they might itch for more.

The same curiosity burned in my eyes more and more for the shows and sports of adults. Those who gave these shows were held in such esteem that almost everyone wished the same for their children, and they were very willing for the children to be flogged if these very games kept them from their studies by which they wanted them to reach the point of being teachers to others.

Look down with compassion on these things, Lord, and deliver us who call upon you now. Deliver those, too, who don't call on you, so that they may call on you and so that you may deliver them.

As a boy, then, I had heard of eternal life promised us through the humility of the Lord our God stooping to our pride. Even from the womb of my mother, who greatly hoped in you, I was signed with the mark of his cross and seasoned with his salt.



Here Augustine recounts the first of two fevers that almost killed him. His mother, Monica, fervently prayed for him, and she almost had him baptized on his deathbed, a common practice at the time.

You saw, Lord, how at one time when yet a boy I was suddenly seized with pains in the stomach and was near death. You saw, my God, for you were my Keeper, with what eagerness of mind and with what faith I asked for the baptism of Christ, your Anointed One, my God and Lord, due to the devoutness of my own mother and of your Church, the mother of us all. At that time, my mother was very anxious, since she worked more lovingly in labor for my salvation than during my natural birth. She would have provided for my cleansing initiation by your health-giving sacraments, confessing you, Lord Jesus, for the remission of sins, if I hadn't suddenly recovered. And so, because I would be further polluted if I were to live, my cleansing through baptism was deferred, because the defilements of sin would bring greater and more perilous guilt after that washing.

I already believed at that time, with my mother and the whole household except my father. Yet he

didn't overcome the power of my mother's devoutness in me so as to prevent me from believing in Christ. The fact that he didn't yet believe didn't make me think that I shouldn't. For it was her earnest concern that you, my God, should be my Father rather than he. In this you enabled her to overcome her husband: Though the better of the two, she deferred to him in obedience because in this she obeyed your commandment as well.

I earnestly ask you, my God, for I would like to know, if it's your will, for what purpose was my baptism then deferred? Was it for my good that the reins were loosened on me, so to speak, for me to sin? Or is it actually that they weren't slackened at all? If not, why does it still echo in my ears to hear it said from all sides, "Leave him alone, let him do what he wants, for he hasn't been baptized yet"? But when it comes to bodily health, no one says, "Let him be wounded even more seriously, for he isn't healed yet." How much better, then, would it have been for me to have been healed spiritually at once. And then, by my friends' diligence and my own, my soul's recovered health would have been kept safe in your keeping who gave it! My mother foresaw these things and preferred to expose the unformed, unregenerate clay to them rather than the very image itself after it was made.

In my childhood, which was less dangerous for me than my adolescence, I had no love of learning and hated to be forced to learn. Yet I was forced to do it, and this was good for me, though I didn't do

well. For I wouldn't have learned unless I was compelled. But no one does well against his will, even though what he does may be good. Yet those who forced me didn't do well either; no, the good that came to me was from you, my God. For they were totally uncaring of how I should use what they forced me to learn, except to satisfy the inordinate desire for shameful glory.

But you, by whom "the very hairs of our head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:30), used for my good the error of all those who urged me to learn. And my own error in my unwillingness to learn, you used for my punishment—a fitting penalty for so small a boy and so great a sinner. So by the instruments of those who didn't do well, you did well for me; and by my own sin you justly punished me. For you have appointed, and it is so, that every inordinate affection should be its own punishment.



Here he's making the point that sin contains its own punishment, and rarely does a punishment need to be added.

But why did I so hate the Greek language, which I studied as a boy? I don't yet fully know the answer. For I loved Latin—not what my first teachers taught me, but what the so-called grammarians teach. For those first lessons—reading, writing, and arithmetic—I thought were as great a burden and punishment as any Greek studies.

And yet where did all this come from, too, but from the sin and vanity of this life? Because I was

“but flesh, a passing breeze that does not return” (Psalm 78:39). For those primary lessons were better, certainly, because they were more certain. By them I achieved and still retain the ability to read written material, and the ability to write what I want.



The Aeneid is a great, epic poem written by Virgil in the first century BC. It tells the legendary story of Aeneas, a warrior and sailor from Troy who sails with his army to the Italian peninsula and, with the help of the gods, defeats the people who live there and founds Rome. Before he gets there, however, his ships dock at Carthage in Northern Africa, where Dido is the queen. She throws a great banquet for Aeneas and his men, and in the course of the evening, she falls madly in love with him. Although it's tempting to stay with Dido, Aeneas knows that his destiny lies ahead, and he leaves in the morning. Deep in grief, Dido curses Aeneas and commits suicide by throwing herself on a burning funeral pyre, the smoke from which Aeneas sees as he sails away.

On the other hand, I was forced to learn about the wanderings of Aeneas, forgetting my own wanderings, and to weep for Dido, who was dead because she killed herself for love. While at the same time, with dry eyes I tolerated my wretched self dying among these things, far from you, God of my life.

What is more pitiful than a miserable person who doesn't pity himself, weeping over the death of Dido for her love of Aeneas, but shedding no tears