

Augustine's Confessions

This lesson is entitled “Restless Heart, the Confessions of Saint Augustine.” The last lesson covered three great figures of the Christian church: Ambrose, Jerome, and Chrysostom. Jerome was a very important scholar. And this lecture will focus on a great scholar, Augustine. If Jerome is a scholar, then Augustine is a scholar, pastor, preacher, and churchman.

This lesson will focus on the life of Augustine, particularly his great writing, *The Confessions*, in which he gives us the story of his early life in his own words. It might seem a little unusual to use an entire lesson to talk about the life of one person. But I think it is important to do that with Augustine because there are so many great themes that come out in his *Confessions*, and I want to share those with you so that we can better understand Augustine. Those themes will not only help us consider the next two lessons, which are also about Augustine, but they will help us during the rest of the course because Augustine is undoubtedly the most important figure that we will study in this course. He is probably the most important figure in the history of the church after the time of the Apostle Paul.

Augustine wrote many letters. In one of his letters written to a widow, which was a long letter in answer to questions about prayer she had asked him in a previous letter, Augustine carefully and with great wisdom responds to her questions. I will read a few sentences from his long letter to her, before we begin with a prayer from Augustine. He says to the widow,

Why the One who knows what we need before we ask Him should urge us to ask and seek and knock may puzzle us. We realize that our Lord and God does not want us to let Him know what we want, since he cannot be ignorant of that. What He wants for us is to exercise our desire in our prayers so that we are capable of receiving what He is preparing to give us. His is a great gift, and we are little and limited in our ability to receive. He tells us to widen our hearts. Our ability to receive His great gift, which eye has not seen, since it has no color, nor ear heard, since it has no sound, and which has not arisen in a human heart, since the human heart has to rise up to it, will grow in proportion as we believe more trustfully, hope more firmly, and desire more ardently.

So we are to pray not because God does not know what we are going to ask, but so that our hearts will be prepared to receive the gift that He will give to us.

It is difficult to choose prayers from Augustine because there are so many. The whole of *The Confessions* is cast in the form of a prayer. It is a wonderful resource for us as we pray. Let us come to the Lord now, and I will use some words from Saint Augustine as we begin our lesson today. “*O Lord our Savior, You have warned us that You will require much of those to whom much is given. Grant that we, whose lot is cast in so godly a heritage, may strive together the more abundantly to extend to others what we so richly enjoy, and as we have entered into the labors of others, so to labor that others may enter into ours, to the fulfillment of Your holy will, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*”

I have already said something that Alister McGrath said in one of his books, that Augustine is probably the greatest and most influential mind of the Christian church throughout its long history. We know much about him. We know about the way he thought and the way he spoke because he has told us, first of all in his famous *Confessions*, which gives his own understanding of his intellectual and spiritual development. The whole book is addressed to God in the form of a prayer. But it is a prayer that is

intended to be overheard. In the *Confessions* Augustine is praying to God but he wants other people to hear what he is saying to God.

The first nine books of the *Confessions*, what we would call “chapters,” are autobiographical. He tells us about his story, from his birth up through his conversion and even beyond. The great theme there is sin and grace—Augustine’s sin and God’s grace. Then books 10 through 13 are quite different. Students have often tried to figure out how those latter books connect with the first books. By book 10 Augustine is dealing with some difficult issues, philosophical and theological issues like memory, time, and eternity. He says he knows what time is, until he tries to explain it, and then he does not know any more. But he continues trying to explain it. And we continue trying to follow him and his reasoning. Then he turns to write about creation and begins an exposition of Genesis 1 in his symbolic, allegorical style of biblical exposition.

Someplace Augustine says that new converts are to be taught the Scriptures, beginning with Genesis 1 and continuing right through the Bible. Some scholars have speculated that that is what Augustine was beginning to do. After describing his own conversion to the Lord he begins to set forth an exposition of the Scriptures. But if that was what he was planning to do, then he did not get very far with it because he stopped after Genesis 1. You can imagine how big the confessions would be if he had provided an exposition of all of Scripture. Perhaps a more reasonable suggestion regarding what Augustine was doing in those last chapters of *The Confessions* comes from Chadwick in his introduction to his translation of *The Confessions*. He says, “The last four books make explicit what is only hinted at in the autobiographical parts, namely that the story of the soul wandering away from God, and it in torment and tears, and finding its way home through conversion, that story is also the story of the entire created order.” So the story of Augustine wandering away from God and then being brought back to God and restored is reflected in the greater picture of all of creation restored to God in God’s own time. We do not know completely what was in Augustine’s mind in those latter books. I do read *The Confessions* at times because I love the book, but I must admit that I generally read the first nine chapters with a great deal of enthusiasm and then slow down in chapter 10 and never finish the last few chapters. The theme in all of this is our need for God’s grace. That will be one of the dominant themes in the life and work of Saint Augustine. And I will explain in the next lesson how Augustine is the champion of God’s grace.

In this lecture I want to talk more about his own life as he sets it forth for us. And I will point out some things that I think are significant for us to think about. The first thing is his family. Augustine was born in Tagasta, which would be Algeria today. He was born in 354. His father was named Patricius and his mother was named Monica. Monica is a Berber name, not a Latin name, which probably indicates that Augustine’s mother was of the indigenous North African stock. We know that she spoke Latin with a strong accent, which indicates that she learned Latin as a second language and not a native language. She was probably a woman of dark skin, as Augustine may have had. But very little is mentioned about that because skin color was so irrelevant in the Roman world that it is rarely discussed.

Monica was a very strong influence in the life of her son. They had a stormy relationship, very close but also at times there was the possibility of strong disagreements and strong feelings. Monica was certainly a wonderful Christian. She was a woman of prayer. Augustine says in *The Confessions*, “My mother, Your faithful servant, wept for me before You more than mothers weep when lamenting their dead children.” She was weeping before God for her son not because he was dead, but because he was not a Christian. Augustine rejected her faith and lived a very worldly life in his early years and even beyond his teenage years. On one occasion when Monica was talking to her pastor about Augustine and how her heart was broken that he was not following the Lord, she began to cry, and the bishop said to her, “It cannot be that the son of these tears should perish.” In other words, God would save Monica’s son

because of her weeping and prayers for him. I do not know how the bishop could really say that, because we do not know that kind of thing. But in this case, he was right. Through the prayers and earnest endeavors of Monica, along with some other factors that God brought into his life, Augustine was finally converted. Fortunately she lived to see Augustine converted and died the following year after his conversion.

We know that Monica was a very faithful woman not only in prayer, but also in witnessing to her family. Her husband, Patricius, was not a Christian. His mother, her mother-in-law, who came to live with them, was not a Christian. Even though it seems that Monica and Patricius did respect and love each other, Patricius did not always make it easy on Monica. And the mother-in-law certainly did not. The Christian woman Monica found herself living in a house where it was difficult to live consistently as a Christian. Eventually, however, she won both her husband and her mother-in-law to Christ. Augustine tells us in *The Confessions* how she did it. He says of her efforts to win her husband that “The virtues with which you had adorned her, and for which he respected, loved, and admired her were like so many voices constantly speaking to him of You.” So it was her wonderful life, not her speaking or her words. She was able to witness to him by being a loving and faithful wife to this man. All her good deeds in that situation, which was a difficult one, spoke like voices from God to Patricius. She also won her mother-in-law. Augustine says “her dutiful attentions and her constant patience and gentleness” finally broke through the defenses of the older woman, and she became a Christian too. I always think of Monica as the supreme example of how to witness in a family, through love, gentleness, courtesy, and concern for others. Augustine pays tribute to his mother when he calls her “a servant of the servants of God.” That title has come to be used of the pope today, but it was used first, not of a pope, but of the Christian woman Monica.

Early on in his life Augustine rejected the faith of his mother. He plunged into a life of sin. In *The Confessions* he tells us that he was sinning as soon as he was born. Some people think that he has a vivid imagination and is exaggerating things with that statement. But he had a theological conviction that this was true, that he was born in sin. And he was somehow able to remember sin in his life, selfishness, jealousy, and things like that. He said, “So tiny a child, so great a sinner.” As we read through *The Confessions* he tells us about other episodes in his life. The famous one is when he was a little boy and he would steal apples from a neighbor not because he was hungry and wanted to eat them, but only because he wanted to steal the apples. He enjoyed doing that. And he set that forth as an example of his sinfulness.

Then as he moves away from home and goes to the big city of Carthage, he falls into a life of immorality. He writes, “I came to Carthage and all around me hissed a cauldron of illicit loves.” You can hear that he was a master of words. He began to feel that this was not the way to live. He wanted somehow to escape from it, but he really did not want to escape from it. He prayed the famous prayer, “O Lord, give me chastity, but not yet.” So he continued to wallow in the sins of the flesh in Carthage.

But later he recognized that all along God was with him, keeping him from more sin. Augustine said, “I attribute to Your grace whatever evil acts I have not done.” So God’s grace was at work in Augustine’s life even before he was converted, keeping him from deeper sins that would perhaps lead him to destroy himself. He also said, “God touched with a bitter taste all my illicit pleasures.” Everything he did had a bitter aftertaste to it.

Thus he was a young man given over to the pleasures of sin in the city of Carthage. But God begins to awaken within him a hope, and he begins to search. He said he was seeking pleasure not in God, but in himself and in God’s other created beings, but what he found was that he plunged into miseries,

confusions, and errors. The further he plunged into the problems, confusions, and disappointments of life, the more he began to wonder if there was something else. You might think that he would remember his mother's belief in the Bible and would thus turn to the Bible for answers. But Augustine had a difficult time believing the Bible. This was partly because of the style of the Bible. It was too crude, and he was too sophisticated to believe it. He liked the classical writings with their smooth Greek and their beautiful words. The Bible seemed inferior to him as a piece of literature. So he did not turn to it yet.

He writes about his "vagabond" mind, following everything he could find. He began to think about philosophy and that he could perhaps find answers to his questions there. When he was 19 years old he read Cicero's *Hortensius*. That book is no longer available because it has been lost, so we do not know exactly what is in it. It was a book that awoke Augustine to the life of the mind. It awakened in him a desire for truth. He said, "That book changed my feelings." Now there was something beyond the flesh. There was the mind and truth out there somewhere, if he could only find it.

Philosophy did not help him much. It led him to astrology. In those days that was considered a fairly respectable way of searching for truth. He said, "I openly consulted those imposters called astrologers." From there he moved into a relationship with a cult called Manichaeism. Manichaeism was a third century Gnostic movement that came from Persia. For a time, it was popular in the Roman world. Manichaeism was made up of a little Christian symbolism, a large dose of Zoroastrian dualism, and some of the quiet refinements of Buddhism. The main problem that Manichaeism tried to address was the problem of evil. Where does evil come from? That is a problem for everybody. It will be a problem that Augustine later deals with and solves in quite a different way than Manichaeism. The Manicheans said that evil is somehow related to the physical, the material—to this world—but not to God. They could not see God as the God of this world, because of all its sin, suffering, problems, and disasters. This world is not worthy of God. So it had a view of God that He is separate from it all. But as Augustine finally realized, that is no answer at all. God is protected from association with evil, but He becomes a very weak god. He would be hardly worth calling a god at all if He had nothing to do or nothing to say regarding the evil of this world. So like the Mormons or like the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Manicheans were full of assertions, but they could not offer a doctrinal system that could satisfy a great mind like that of Augustine. Or they could bring forth no truth that could calm a miserable heart.

After he was in the Manichean movement for a while, he began to ask some very searching questions. The local Manichean could not answer him, so they put him off and said the main teacher was coming soon and Augustine should wait for him. But when he arrived, he could not do much better than the local people. So Augustine left the movement, and he plunged into a time of skepticism. He thought that perhaps there were no answers. He had tried philosophy and the religion of the Manicheans. Yet he came to a time of disillusionment that drove him to skepticism and caused him to lose hope that truth could be found.

Then came another stage that he was brought to by his vagabond mind. He began to read the Neo-Platonic philosophers, and he began to see some glimmers of light in that teaching. The Neo-Platonic philosophers saw afar off a land of peace. There was a vision there that Augustine could relate to and that he began to long for. But he said they could not show him the way to the land of peace. As he read their writings, many of the things he read reminded him of the prologue of Saint John's Gospel. What was missing in the Neo-Platonic philosophers, however, was the way to get to the peace, the hope, and the life. They had no place for the incarnation. It was the incarnation of Jesus Christ that was missing. He said, "That the Word was made flesh I did not read there," in the Neo-Platonists.

God was bringing Augustine to where He wanted him. The “Hound of Heaven” was after him. It would not be long before God would triumph in His grace in the life of Saint Augustine. Let me go back and talk about God’s providence in his life as the Lord led him to the place God wanted him to be so that God could bring to him His truth. We followed the search of Augustine, now I will offer some comments on his career and the places he lived.

Augustine had decided that he would make a career out of rhetoric. It was a very promising career for someone in those days like Augustine who had the ability to use words. He describes his profession as a vendor of words. He realized later that teaching rhetoric was also a kind of “chair of lies,” because he was not concerned with the truth of the words but only their effect. God used that career experience in His providence. He gave Augustine his gift with words and provided him with training because he would later use words not to tell lies but to tell the truth of God in some marvelous ways.

After a while, in North Africa, Augustine began to get restless. He felt that if he was ever going to reach the pinnacle of his career he had to leave the remote lands and go to the big city; even Carthage did not satisfy him. He wanted to go to Rome. He decided to move to Rome when he was 29 years old. His mother did not want him to go to Rome. She argued and pled with him not to go because she believed that as long as he was close to her she could keep her eye on him and try to convert him. It was bad enough for him to be in Carthage, but if he went all the way to Rome, who knows what would happen to him. Actually, Augustine had to slip away. He would sometimes tell her he was going and sometimes tell her he was not going. Then he got on a boat and left before she knew it. And she was dismayed. Later Augustine said, “By her flood of tears, what she was begging of You, my God, was that You would not allow me to sail to Rome. Yet in Your deep counsel, You heard the central point of her longing, though not granting her what she then asked, namely that You should make me what she continually prayed for.” Augustine is saying that God did not answer his mother’s words—“O Lord, do not let him sail”—in order that He might answer his mother’s prayer—“O Lord, save him.” Going to Rome became a very essential step in the conversion of Augustine. Sometimes God does not answer our words in order that He might answer our prayer, which is deeper than those words.

When he got to Rome he realized that it was not the place he should be. He should be in Milan. By that time Rome was not as important as Milan. He went to Milan in 384, and there he met a man who became a great influence on his life, Ambrose, bishop of Milan. Augustine wrote in *The Confessions*, “All unknowing, I was brought by You to him, that knowing, I should be brought by him to You.” God was getting him closer to Ambrose because he was the person God had chosen to be a significant instrument in the conversion of Augustine.

The reason he became interested in Ambrose was that Ambrose could speak. He was a great orator. Augustine would attend the services in the church in Milan in order to hear the sermon. Augustine said, “My pleasure was in the charm of his language.” He reveled in the flow of the elegance and eloquence of this preacher. He also became interested in Ambrose himself. That has always impressed me because Ambrose was a great church leader and a great man, and there were plenty of things that Ambrose could have spent his time doing rather than getting involved with a relatively unimportant newcomer to the city. Augustine said, “I began to like him. At first, indeed, not as a teacher of the truth, for I had absolutely no confidence in Your church, but I began to like him as a human being who was kind to me.” So Augustine was in Milan, not interested in the content of the sermons but rather in the words of the preacher. And he did not have any confidence in the church, but somehow he liked this preacher because he was kind. That should be a great example for all of us.

As Augustine lived in Milan he was hearing the sermons, going to church, hearing the singing that so deeply moved him, and other people were friends to him and were testimonies to him. Then he read the famous book by Athanasius, *The Life of St. Antony*. Reading of the dedication of this man who left everything and went to the desert so moved Augustine that God also used that to gently push him to the place where he would find new life. Finally, and mainly, he was reading the Bible. It was beginning to be a book that looked differently to him than it had at home in North Africa.

The climax of all this is the famous story of when Augustine was in the garden and he heard the voice of a little child saying, “tolle lege, tolle lege,” which means “take and read, take and read.” He tried to think of a children’s game in which that expression was used but he could not think of one. But somewhere outside the garden wall that little voice kept saying, “take and read.” He happened to have with him a book of the Bible, the book of Romans. He opened it the way we are told not to read the Bible. He put his finger on a verse, which read, “Let us walk honestly, as in the day, not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying.” Those words came with great power into Augustine’s mind and heart. The text continued, “But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh to fulfill the lust thereof.” And that did it for Augustine. It was a long process, and that was just the climax of many influences upon Augustine. But in 386, at the age of 32, Augustine had become a new creature in Christ Jesus. He said in *The Confessions*, “I have learned to love You late.” It seemed like 32 years wasted. But it was not really so because God’s providence was in all of it. Yet Augustine regretted that it had taken so long.

He spent the months between his conversion, which was in July 386, and his baptism by Ambrose the next Easter, in retreat at the country estate of a friend not far from Milan, near Como in the beautiful lake district of Italy. He wrote about the loveliness of God’s evergreen paradise. He was there as a Christian with friends, and yet there were some friends there who were not Christians. There was one non-Christian friend whom Augustine was particularly close to and he said, “My conversion did not put an end to our friendship.” Monica was there. She had come up from Africa. Augustine’s son, Adeodatus, was there, who was his son by his concubine whom he had in North Africa. And some other friends were there. Augustine said, “We rested in you from the heat of the world.” It was a delightful time in a beautiful place.

Augustine enjoyed that period in his life. He began to write some books based on some conversations among that circle of friends. In his book, *Retractions*, which he wrote later in life, he tried to put everything together that he had said or written and tried to take back some things and explain some things. He said in *Retractions*, “The books that I wrote there were indeed now written in Your service, but they still breathed the spirit of the school of pride.” As an old man he looked back at those early works as Christian, but he thought there was too much of him in those books.

In the summer of 387 Augustine left Milan for Africa. He could not go back directly because of war. He stopped for a while at Ostia, the town near Rome. Monica died there. If you read *The Confessions* you will find a lovely passage describing the lovely conversations Augustine had with his mother there, talking about heaven.

Augustine stayed in Rome until the next summer and then returned to Africa. Soon he was ordained, in 391. Then he became bishop in 395. When Augustine was ordained, he wept, not for joy, but because he had a feeling he was entering into something that was going to be difficult. While preaching on the anniversary of his ordination he once said, “To preach, to rebuke, to correct, to edify, to care for individual souls is a great burden, great work, great labor. Who would not avoid that labor? But the Gospel frightens me.” He had to do it, even though he could see that he was bringing upon himself many

tears and much labor. The first thing he did after being ordained was to ask for a sabbatical, in order to spend some time getting ready for the task ahead. He wanted to spend some time studying the Bible praying and weeping over his sins.

Ordination was a great thing for Augustine. It focused him. It screwed him down and kept him committed to something. He was such a great man that he could have done so many things, which might have dissipated his energies. As an ordained minister and then as a bishop, he had his task before him. He was now a man under authority, a servant of God, and like his mother, a servant of the servants of God.

He spent the rest of his life after he was ordained as bishop of Hippo in that rather out-of-the-way town. It was not an important place, though it became important because Augustine lived there. For 35 years he lived there and carried on a ministry, including preaching great sermons. It has been remarked of his preaching that he never held back for fear that some of his ideas might go over the heads of some of his hearers. His sermons fed the soul but also held great ideas that he preached even though many of the people in his congregation would not have been able to grasp those ideas. He spent much time counseling. He governed the church as a bishop. He spent much time writing. He said, "If the Lord will, I will labor in doing that which I think I may, to be of some service even to future generations." So he wrote many books.

That was the story of a very significant man. He died in 430, just before the city fell into the hands of the Vandals, who had come across from Spain into North Africa. As Augustine was dying he had the penitential psalms of David written out and fixed to the wall of his bedroom, where he could read them repeatedly so that he could confess his sins and praise God for His mercy to him in the words of the Psalms.

"Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).