

Augustine's Quest for Rest in His *Confessions*

by Barry Waugh

Before Aurelius Augustinus (354-430) became Bishop of Hippo on the northern coast of Africa in what is currently Algeria, he lived a life of pleasure characterized by yielding to the temptations of flesh, power, fame, and mind. His personal account of his pre-Christian life and his musings on such perplexities as the problem of memory are given in his *Confessions*. Augustine's *Confessions* is considered one of the great works of Christian historical-theological literature and a devotional classic.¹ Scholars have debated the literary form, purpose, and content of *Confessions* over the years. It is admired for the beauty of its language, its sophisticated literary, philosophical, and theological construction, and its vivid and honest recollections of the life of its author. Some scholars would even say it began a new genre of literature. However, Augustine's purpose in *Confessions* was not to develop a new type of literature, but rather to present his past to his readers so they would learn from his example and find true rest in worshipping the Lord through faith in Christ. As Augustine reflected upon his life of promiscuity, thievery, love of sin, patronizing of the theater, and worship of himself, his great desire was to turn restless sinners to the only true rest which is the spiritual rest of salvation through Christ.

Augustine opens his *Confessions* with an affirmation of the central problem that had been plaguing him for the years before his conversion. The following may be the most recognized quote not only from *Confessions* but from all of Augustine's considerable number of literary efforts.

You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. (I.i.1)

He uses his own quest for rest in *Confessions* as a call to those who are running hither and yon seeking pleasure—looking for love in all the wrong places, seeking peace apart from the Peacemaker, and exhausting themselves with the busy-ness of life as they pursue gaining the whole world while losing their souls—to turn them to the gracious rest of redemption and worshipping God. Augustine's sentence regarding his own purpose in life would be affirmed in the seventeenth century in the answer to the first question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, which says, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." After a long period of following his own way for his own pleasure, Augustine came to realize that his restless and self-seeking life needed to be turned to glorify and enjoy God and thus obtain spiritual rest in the *already* of his earthly life and eschatologically in the *not yet* of eternity.

A little into Book One of *Confessions*, Augustine recounts how he had asked God to sanctify and equip him to use the gifts and knowledge he possessed for God's glory even though he had been using them for his own purposes.

¹ There are several editions of Augustine's *Confessions* available. The edition quoted in this article was translated and introduced by Henry Chadwick, published by Oxford University Press, 1992, and is a particularly readable version when compared with some of the older editions like that of E. B. Pusey. In Britannica's Great Books series, the Augustine volume is no. 18 and its *Confessions* is Pusey's translation. The first series of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers has *Confessions* in vol. 1. Some editions of *Confessions* are available for download on the Internet.

Enable me to love you with all my strength that I may clasp your hand with all my heart. Turn to your service whatever may be of use in what I learnt in boyhood. May I dedicate to your service my power to speak and write and read and count; for when I learnt vanities; you imposed discipline on me and have forgiven me the sin of desiring pleasure from those vanities. For in them I learnt many useful words, but these words can also be learnt through things that are not vain, and that is the safe way along which children should walk. (I.xv.24)

Augustine realized the Lord's faithfulness to him even though he had not loved him. One aspect of his love for himself was shown in his relentless pursuit of knowledge. It was not the learning itself that was evil, but instead, it was learning for his own selfish purposes that was wrong. He sought the glorification of created Augustine rather than the glorification of his Creator. As Augustine looked back on his attitudes with the lenses of redeemed vision, he realized that his learning and all aspects of his life needed to be used to serve God's purposes.

Moving into Book Two, Augustine reflected upon his life before faith in Christ as he remembered that during his sixteenth year he committed a sin he considered particularly offensive—he stole some pears from a nearby tree. Today, some might look at such an act as a juvenile prank or an adolescent challenge to authority, but in Augustine's thinking the piracy of the pears was reprehensible because of his motive.

I...wanted to carry out an act of theft and did so, driven by no kind of need other than my inner lack of any sense of, or feeling for, justice. Wickedness filled me. I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong. There was a pear tree near our vineyard laden with fruit, though attractive in neither color nor taste. To shake the fruit off the tree and carry off the pears, I and a gang of naughty adolescents set off late at night after (in our usual pestilential way) we had continued our game in the streets. We carried off a huge load of pears. But they were not for our feasts but merely to throw to the pigs. Even if we ate a few, nevertheless our pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed. (II.iv.9)

Augustine's recollection of this theft through the illumined vision of his maturing Christian faith exposed him to the callousness of his heart—"our pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed." He saw that he was dead in trespasses and sin because he stole for the sake of stealing. Just as some four year olds when forbidden to touch the vase in the parlor will head immediately to it in the absence of their parents, adolescent Augustine went after the pears simply because they were forbidden. It would have been one thing to have stolen the pears because they were beautiful, another to have stolen out of hunger like Hugo's Jean Valjean when he stole the loaf of bread in *Les Misérables*, but it was particularly offensive to Augustine that he stole the pears just to be mean, disobedient, and enjoy having what was forbidden. John Owen commented on the pernicious power of sin when he wrote that the "Custom of sinning takes away the *sense* of it; the course of the world takes away the *shame* of it; and love to it makes men greedy in the

pursuit of it.”² There was no sense of shame in Augustine’s life. He stole the fruit because the seduction of pleasure led to sin for the sake of sinning—*he stole the pears for the delight of stealing*.

Turning for a moment to Augustine’s *On The Trinity* for some additional insight into his life before conversion, it is clear that he knew chastity was right and promiscuity was wrong, but despite that knowledge he fulfilled his lust because he simply loved being disobedient. In *On the Trinity*, Augustine discussed the knowledge of right and wrong possessed by those who are not Christians.

Where indeed are these rules written, wherein even the unrighteous recognizes what is righteous, wherein he discerns that he ought to have what he himself has not? Where, then, are they written, unless in the book of that Light which is called Truth? Whence every righteous law is copied and transferred (not by migrating to it, but by being as it were impressed upon it) to the heart of the man that worketh righteousness; as the impression from a ring passes into the wax, yet does not leave the ring. But he who worketh not, and yet sees how he ought to work, he is the man that is turned away from that light, which yet touches him.³

This quote describes the theological basis for the awareness of righteousness he had as an ungodly youth. What Augustine described demonstrates Paul’s teaching in Romans 1:18-19 and 2:14-15 that humanity fallen in sin suppresses the truth of God that is clearly visible in his work of creation and understood in the human conscience. Human beings are not morally neutral creatures before conversion but are instead captives of their sinful natures. Their awareness of right and wrong is due to the light God has given in creation and conscience. Owen discussed this issue when he wrote that under

...the ashes of our collapsed nature there are yet remaining certain sparks of celestial fire, consisting in inbred notices of good and evil, of rewards and punishments, of the presence and all-seeing eye of God, of help and assistance to be had from him, with a dread of his excellencies where any thing is apprehended unworthy of him or provoking unto him; and where there are any means of instruction from supernatural revelation, by the word preached, or the care of parents in private, there they are insensibly improved and increased.⁴

Augustine knew that his promiscuous life was wrong but he chose to cover the light he had and continue in his ways. Owen’s use of “certain sparks of celestial fire” to describe the innate ideas of right and wrong mentioned by Augustine is terminology that John Calvin had used in his works to describe the innate ideas of good and evil that all persons have. Augustine had the

² John Owen, editor W. H. Gould, "The Manner of Conversion Explained in the Instance of Augustine," *The Works of John Owen, D.D.*, vol. III (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1852): 343.

³ *On the Trinity*, trans. by Arthur West Haddan, rev. and annotated with introduction by W.G.T. Shedd, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. III, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), XIV.15.21, pp. 194-95.

⁴ Owen, 345.

influence of his mother Monica, who, as Owen said, “improved and increased” her son’s understanding of God and encouraged him to turn from his sinful practices. Before redemption, Augustine sinned because he wanted to sin, but at the same time he was intellectually aware that his sinful acts were wrong.

As Augustine reflected upon his miss-spent years he mentioned his increasing interest in the theater in Book Three. The theater of the day was an important form of entertainment as can be seen when visiting Roman ruins today because city sites often have remnants of a theater. From his perspective as a lover of God and righteousness, Augustine looked back and wondered why he had taken so much delight in the miseries portrayed by the actors in their roles. Was there some kind of satisfaction to be obtained via vicarious participation in the lives of the characters? He described his fascination with the challenges, misery, and evil portrayed on the dramatic stage when he said,

I was captivated by theatrical shows. They were full of representations of my own miseries and fueled my fire. Why is it that a person should wish to experience suffering by watching grievous and tragic events which he himself would not wish to endure? Nevertheless, he wants to suffer the pain given by being a spectator of these sufferings, and the pain itself is pleasure. What is this but amazing folly? If the human calamities, whether in ancient histories or fictitious myths, are so presented that the theatre goer is not caused pain, he walks out of the theatre disgusted and highly critical. But if he feels pain, he stays riveted in his seat enjoying himself. (III.ii.2)

The depth of Augustine’s spiritual condition led him to delight in suffering vicariously through the experiences portrayed by the actors. If Bishop Augustine were to return today and visit the cinema or stage one can only speculate how he might respond to the abundant portrayals of gratuitous promiscuity, disturbing and desensitizing violence, lust for power, voracious greed, and hatred for righteousness. He expressed his affinity for suffering saying that, “at that time, poor thing that I was, I loved to suffer and sought out occasions for such suffering” (III.ii.4). As has been shown, Augustine loved to steal the pears for the sake of stealing, and now we find him loving to suffer for the sake of suffering. When one truly loves an activity, one not only delights in participating in the activity itself but also enjoys the camaraderie of others engaging in the same activity or seeing actors portraying that activity on stage. According to *Confessions*, the person who does not know God is burdened with the antithetical perplexity of on the one hand, enduring sin, but on the other hand, enjoying its pleasures personally and vicariously.

In Book Four, Augustine describes his thoughts at the death of a friend, “At that time that was my state. I wept very bitterly and took my rest in bitterness” (IV.vi.11). The misery of mourning became more important to Augustine than his friend’s death. Troubled by grief, bitterness, and turmoil, Augustine described himself as carrying his “lacerated and bloody soul” as a painful burden, but he found that he could not lay it aside. He obtained no “calmness” in games, songs, pleasant odors, feasts, sex, nor poetry, but relief came only through “groaning and tears” (IV.vii.12). Augustine blamed God for his condition at the time—God was a “vain phantom” who would give no “rest.” Thus, his solution was to leave his home in Thagaste and go to Carthage—maybe a change in environment would alleviate his condition. But, as the passage concludes, Augustine realized that he was trying to escape from himself and such a feat is impossible (IV.vii.12).

Neither death nor mourning could be escaped by a simple move from one city to another but they instead require heavenly mindedness. If one becomes too attached to the temporal then one is seeking rest in the temporal—"But in these things there is no point of rest; they lack permanence" (IV.x.15). Sinners are to turn to the Lord and stand with him and as one stands with God one reposes in him (IV.xii.18). Augustine exhorted readers of *Confessions*, "There is no rest where you seek for it. Seek for what you seek, but it is not where you are looking for it" (IV.xii.18). The confusing tapestry of this lesser world leads human kind away from God, not towards him; it is good to seek the God of rest through the grace of redemption, but worldly pursuits can only lead to chaos and restlessness. The emphasis of Book IV is on the fragility and temporality of human life and that which is earthly versus the strength and eternity of the heavenly; the Christian must focus on the heavenly and the God who gives rest to the righteous even though their circumstances may mitigate against rest. Augustine would not be able to identify with the saying, "He is so heavenly minded that he is no earthly good."

In Book Eight, the continuing duel between Augustine's own will and God's is illumined further. A vivid picture is painted of the agonizing ordeal of struggling between heaven and hell, "I was twisting and turning in my chain until it would break completely" (VIII.xi.25). However, no matter how much Augustine fought the bondage he could not break the chain himself. He was coming to understand that the chain binding him in sin could only be cut by the grace of the divine hammer striking the chisel and severing the chain upon the anvil of mercy. He was still bound to his love of sin and his lust reminded him of its enticement because his old loves held him back.

They tugged at the garment of my flesh and whispered: "Are you getting rid of us?" And "from this moment we shall never be with you again, not for ever and ever." What filth, what disgraceful things they were suggesting! I was listening to them with much less than half my attention. Nevertheless they held me back. (VIII.xi.26).

Augustine continued in his anguish as he struggled within himself while the grace of God progressively exposed the severity of his condition. The will to continue sinning and the will to stop sinning were at loggerheads, but the grace of God shone through the Scriptures when Augustine "heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl...saying and repeating over and over again 'Pick up and read, pick up and read'" (VIII.xii.29). It was at that time that he picked up the epistle to the Romans, opened it, and read, "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts" (Rom. 13:13-14) (VIII.xii.29).

The perfect mirror of the Word of God showed Augustine his spiritual condition as he suppressed his knowledge of God in unrighteousness. These words of Romans 13:13-14 confronted him with his sin and the necessity of relief through the grace of Christ. John Owen commented that this work of God in the garden fulfilled the requirement that conversion calls for a sense of the severity of sin by "fixing the vain mind of a sinner upon a due consideration of sin, its nature, tendency, and end, with his own concernment therein, and a fixing of a due sense of sin upon the secure mind of the sinner, with suitable affections unto its apprehensions."⁵ Augustine's "vain mind" was fixed upon his own participation in the practices condemned by God through the Apostle Paul in Romans 13:13-14, but via the illumination of the Holy Spirit

⁵ Owen, 350.

speaking he came to have “a due sense of sin.” The pleasures of sin had to be seen for what they were before Augustine could be freed from sin by God’s grace.

A prayer of gratitude to God for his saving grace opens Book Nine of *Confessions*. The turmoil of the past is over because Augustine no longer desires to sin but instead aspires to suppress its enticements and run from its lure as though he were Joseph running from the temptation presented by Potiphar’s wife. The opening statement of Book Nine clearly presents a new perspective on life as Augustine realized his liberation and the greatness of God’s redeeming work as he grew in sanctification.

“O Lord, I am your servant, I am your servant and the son of your handmaid. You have snapped my chains. I will sacrifice to you the offering of praise” (Ps. 116:16-17). Let my heart praise you and my tongue, and “let all my bones say, Lord who is like you?” (Ps. 35:10). Let them speak, answer me, and say to my soul “I am your salvation” (Ps. 35:3).” (IX.i.1)

Augustine used “snapped my chains” to express the release from bondage he experienced as he realized the futility of seeking pleasure and life apart from God. Book One through Book Eight of *Confessions* describe mostly the years of struggle Augustine faced as he was weighed down by the chains of sin. But along with those chains of bondage was a sense of sin that he suppressed, and the only key to the lock of bondage was found in God’s regenerating and justifying grace. With the beginning of Book Nine there is a transition from the enslaved to the liberated Augustine, through grace he was free to love and worship God.

Book Ten of the *Confessions* is concerned with Augustine’s thoughts on the subject of memory. It analyzes what he remembered, why it was remembered, how it was remembered, why his bad memories could not be forgotten, and other perplexing issues of his memory. Augustine’s fascination with memory exemplifies his frustration with the indelible images of his past. It is as if he believed the disassembly and analysis of the mechanics of memory would expose the weaknesses of its components so he could modify his memory to block the images of what he had done before grace changed his life. He wanted to clear his memory of the images, thoughts, and words from his miss-spent past and then write into it his new life as he grew in sanctification and stored information for better memories to access in the future. For Augustine, memory was a blessing and a curse. Memory was a blessing in that God’s patience is remembered and the goodness of his grace, but it was also a curse because the remembrance of past transgressions and their short-lived enjoyment become instruments used for temptation. Augustine’s memory plagued him with recollections of the pleasure he sought before conversion, but as he remembered his past he was also reminded of God’s benevolence expressed in deliverance from the power of sin and death.

As Augustine draws *Confessions* to a close, he returns to the subject of rest. Book One, began proclaiming that one is restless until rest is found in God’s grace; Book Thirteen comes to its culmination affirming the eschatological rest for the righteous as Augustine muses about the unending Sabbath and the joys of eternal life.

The seventh day has no evening and has no ending. You sanctified it to abide everlastingly. After your “very good” works, which you made while remaining yourself in repose, you rested the seventh day (Gen. 2:2-3). This utterance in your book foretells

for us that after our works, which, because they are your gift to us, are very good, we also may rest in you for the Sabbath of eternal life. (XIII.xxxvi.51)

The quote parallels the believer's ultimate eternal rest to God's rest from the work of creation. God's work of creating, sustaining, and maintaining the existing order ends in the glorious and perfect new heaven and earth. Rest begins by doing the works that God has given to his people in this life, but will then ultimately be completed in the heavenly rest of the eternal Sabbath. As the pre-conversion years of Augustine showed him trying to fill his empty soul by indulging his lusts, his post-conversion years present a soul overflowing with the blessings of grace and the enjoyment of worshipping God in spirit and in truth.

In conclusion, *Confessions* is an autobiographical-spiritual narrative concerned with documenting Augustine's transformation from a restless lover of himself to a restful lover of God. The book develops with the re-occurring theme of a restless soul seeking peace. His thefts, promiscuity, theater attendance, and other pleasures were substitutes for the spiritual repose that is found only in the everlasting arms of God. The spiritual journey he described in *Confessions* affirms the truth expressed by the Apostle Paul in Romans 2:4, "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long-suffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" Faith brought rest, but not a rest of indolence; the rest obtained was peace with God, however, peace with God created a new restlessness as Augustine sought to comprehend his life, discipleship, and the universe in terms of Christian presuppositions. It was the Creator of the universe who condescended to extricate Augustine from the miry bog of sin and death and show his manifold grace and faithfulness by bringing him into the kingdom of life. However, Augustine's presentation of his past is not cathartic but is instead evangelistic. Just as promiscuity, the problems of memory, pleasure for its own end, and other aspects of his life were presented as evidence of his transition from sin and self-love into obedience and worship, so today the restless servant of sin may find true and eternal rest in the grace of redemption through faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, *Confessions* is the personal reflection of Bishop Augustine upon his quest for rest in all the wrong places until he found spiritual rest through the mercy of God and came to glorify and enjoy the Lord.