

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 25

St. Augustine – Part One

Philip Stokes has a book entitled “Philosophy ~ 100 Essential Thinkers.” Two of his choices for inclusion in that list/book are Christians. The first of the two Christians is Saint Augustine.¹ Augustine’s inclusion is not surprising. For his life and thought are important not only for his contributions to the church² and faith, but also for the general effect he has had on Western Civilization. We anticipate spending two weeks of Church History Literacy on St. Augustine. It would be easy to spend two months!

We know a good deal about Augustine not only from external sources, but from his own pen as well. After his conversion from around 397 to 400, Augustine wrote his *Confessions*.³ The book is typically characterized as an autobiography, but in truth it is more. It is actually a collection of 12 books that are one long prayer to God. They begin with praise⁴ and proclamation of who God is. They continue from there into Augustine’s confession of his life.⁵

Augustine was born on November 13, 354, in the North African town of Thagaste. Today, this town is known as Souk Ahras in the Northeastern part of Algeria. The town was part of the Roman Empire and was about 300 years old when Augustine was born. Thagaste was fairly prosperous and a center for the agricultural region of that area.

¹ The second is Boethius who lived from 480 to 524. We cover him later in Church History Literacy!

² Jerome in the 400’s would write that Augustine was the “second founder of the faith.” Pope John Paul II wrote on the occasion of the 1600th anniversary of Augustine’s baptism that “almost all in the [Catholic] Church and in the West [Western civilization] think of themselves as [Augustine’s] disciples and children.”

³ The quotations from Augustine’s *Confessions* we are using come from John Ryan’s translation, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (Doubleday 1960).

⁴ The confessions begin with the sentence, “You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is your power and to your wisdom there is no limit” (1:1:1).

⁵ In his introduction, Ryan characterizes the book as a three-fold confession of Augustine’s sin, his faith, and of praise (Intro. at 29). Augustine decided to “bring back to mind my past foulness and the carnal corruptions” of his soul “not because I love them, but that I may love you, my God” (2:1:1).

Augustine's mother was a Christian woman named Monica.⁶ His father was a pagan named Patricius (who finally converted to Christianity and was baptized while on his deathbed). This is a wonderful example of the effect a godly woman can have on an unbelieving husband. Peter wrote of wives living in such a way that unbelieving husbands might "be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives" (1 Peter 3:1-2).

Augustine's family was not incredibly wealthy, but they sacrificed to enable him to get a Roman education. In 370, when Augustine was 17, his father died. Prior to his father's death, Augustine had to lay off school for a year because of finances. Augustine would continue his schooling because of the financial aid from a local townsman. With the monetary aid, Augustine left Thagaste and went to Carthage for further schooling in 371 where he stretched his wings.⁷

In Carthage, Augustine continued to live the rebellious life he had started as a teenager. "I was not yet in love, but I was in love with love" (3:1:1). Augustine would later write in prayer to God that, "in my youth, I burned to get my fill of hellish things... I stank in your eyes, but I was pleasing to myself and I desired to be pleasing to the eyes of men" (2:1:1). Around the age of 17 or 18, Augustine began living with a woman and had a son out of wedlock. Augustine continued to live with his "companion" for 15 years. His child Adeodatus died in 390.

Reflecting on these years of rebellion and sin, Augustine would later write that recalling them did not make his soul fearful. Rather, Augustine was confident that God had "forgiven me so many evils and so many impious works." Augustine gave over those sins to God's "grace" and "mercy" with confidence the sins were dissolved! (2:7:15)

Augustine studied rhetoric, which would have included an education in classics, philosophy, as well as eloquence and persuasion. Somewhere around age 18 or 19 in his "ordinary course of study," Constantine was studying the Roman orator Cicero and developed a great desire for wisdom and philosophy. "Love of wisdom has the name philosophy⁸ in Greek, and that book set me on fire for it" (*Confess.* 3:5:8). Augustine turned to scripture to satisfy that desire, but was unimpressed. "It seemed to me unworthy of comparison with the nobility of Cicero's writings" (*Confess.* 3:5:9). Augustine later attributes his swelling pride

⁶ Augustine actually spelled it "Monnica."

⁷ Away from his home and immediate surroundings, Augustine took on airs! He writes of himself as "overflowing" with "vanity, I took pride in being refined and cultured" (3:1:1).

⁸ Philosophy comes from two Greek words that are put together meaning "lover or friend of wisdom."

as the reason he “turned away from [scripture’s] humble style, and [his] sharp gaze did not penetrate into its inner meaning” (Confess. 3:5:9).

Augustine’s frustration with scripture came not only from the clumsiness of his Latin translation,⁹ but also from the lifestyles of the early Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, as well as Moses and even King David. After his conversion, Augustine would reckon this experience to someone who came across a piece of armor and knowing nothing about its function, attempted to put a helmet on his leg. When the helmet would not properly fit on the leg, the man might discard it as foolish and useless. But the truth is, the man just failed to grasp the importance and proper use of the armor (Confess. 3:7).

For a while, Augustine fell in with a cult that used some Christian terms but was far from the faith. The group was called “Manichees.” They felt they had some mystical knowledge that superseded the other religions of the day, echoing some Gnostic ideas we have studied in earlier classes. While Augustine thought he was receiving spiritual enlightenment and nourishment from the deceptive philosophy, he would later call it about as nourishing as food you eat in your dreams! (3:6:10)

Augustine credited his ultimate conversion and salvation to the prayers of his mother. During his time of great sin and rebellion, Augustine’s mother “wept more for me than mothers weep over their children’s dead bodies” (3:11:19). Monica had a dream where she was standing on a measuring stick (think ruler, but with the idea that it stands for scripture or “canon”). Monica is crushed with grief. She sees Augustine coming toward her smiling and joyful. Augustine asks his mother why she is crying and so upset, and she responds that her tears are because of his sinful rebellion against God and faith. In the dream, Augustine tells his mother not to worry. He stood where she did.

When Monica later recounted this dream to Augustine, Augustine “interpreted” it for her. In his pride and confidence, he explained this meant that Monica should join him in his belief system and lifestyle! Monica firmly and resolutely rebuked Augustine and said, “No!” She proclaimed that in the dream, Augustine stood where his mother was, not vice versa! It was almost nine years before Augustine would stand on the same rule as his mother, but that dream brought his mother (“that chaste, devout, and sober widow” who “watered the earth” with the many tears that “flowed down from her eyes.”) much consolation (3:11:19).

⁹ Augustine was neither a Greek nor a Hebrew scholar. He would later question why he had “detested” the study of the Greek language as a student! (1:12:20) He was using the Latin translations of scriptures at the time. It was a few more decades before Jerome would give the church a more useful and well-written Latin version of scriptures that we now call the Vulgate.

In 383, Augustine was teaching in Carthage, but was a bit fed up with the student body. Augustine decided to leave Carthage and teach at Rome. Augustine's mother, who had never remarried after her husband's death, was living with him at the time and begged him not to leave her. Augustine went to the boat docks to set sail, and his mother followed him trying to keep him from leaving by hugging him and not letting go. Augustine lied to his mother and told her he would not leave for a while, and once she accepted this and headed home, he hopped onto the next boat! Remembering the grief he caused his mother, Augustine would confess this sin in beautiful language:

“Thus I lied to my mother – to such a mother! - and slipped away from her. This deed also you have forgiven me in your mercy, and you preserved me...from waters of the sea and kept me safe for the waters of your grace. For when I would be washed clean by that water, then also would be dried up those rivers flowing down from my mother's eyes, by which, before you and in my behalf, she daily watered the ground beneath her face” (5:8:15).

Augustine would fall very ill in Rome and considered himself on the verge of death. Although his mother knew nothing of his condition, Augustine was convinced in his later life that the prayers of his mother are what saw him through his health crisis. Even in this health crisis, Augustine did not find God. In fact, his examinations of scripture again left him unimpressed. He found too many areas of scripture that were indefensible to his deft logic and philosophizing mind!

Augustine found Rome not much better than Carthage. So, when a job opening as a professor of rhetoric in the city of Milan opened up, Augustine applied! He got the job, and just one year after his arrival in Rome, Augustine moved north to Milan.

Who should greet Augustine in Milan, but the Bishop there, Ambrose (if you do not have last week's lesson on Ambrose, get it and read it! Get to know the man and see the way God's tapestry is woven in and through the lives of so many!). Ambrose received Augustine “in a fatherly fashion” and Augustine “began to love him, at first not as a teacher of the truth, which I utterly despaired of finding in your Church, but as a man who was kindly disposed towards me” (5:13:23).

Augustine would listen to Ambrose's sermons, but not for content! Augustine would listen as a professional to “try out his eloquence!” Augustine wanted to know if Ambrose's preaching “came up to its reputation.” It did! While Augustine remained at best uninterested, even contemptuous of Ambrose's subject matter, Augustine still hung on every word! As Augustine would later put it, “little by little I was drawing closer to you, although I did not know it” (5:13:23).

Augustine's conversion was not immediate. Over time, he first decided that perhaps there could be intellectual integrity in the Christian faith, that although it was not the *only* truth, perhaps it was still valid in its own way. Then, as he adjusted to this, he gradually realized that the Christian faith could not be one of many truths. He saw that if the faith were in fact true, then it was the *only* truth.

Somewhere in this time, Augustine's mother had re-found her son. She had made the hard and dangerous journey over sea to get to Milan and began living with Augustine once again. Augustine told his mother that he was no longer involved in the cult, and while not yet a Christian, was at least going to church! Monica felt her dream was finally finding reality! Before Augustine, Monica was "calm and with a heart filled with confidence." She told Augustine that "she believed in Christ that before she departed from this life she would see" Augustine a faithful Christian. Augustine remembered later that "this much she said to me" so calmly! Yet he knew that away from his eyes, his mother continued to pray with tears that God would speed his enlightenment of her son's darkness.

Monica was zealous in attending church. She could see the influence Ambrose was having on her son. She heard him speak every time she could. "She would hang on [his] words." "She loved that man as though he were an angel of God, because she had learned that through him [Augustine] had been brought...to the wavering, doubtful state in which [he] then was" (6:1:1).

Ambrose was amazed at the piety and growth that he saw in Monica. Ambrose told this to Augustine one day. Augustine had never told Ambrose that Augustine himself was not a believer. Augustine pretended to be something he was not.

Augustine longed for a chance to have a one on one session with Ambrose and to discuss the spiritual questions and longing in Augustine's heart and mind. But, the time was never there. Ambrose's schedule really precluded much one on one time. So, Augustine continued to go hear Ambrose each Sunday, not really recognizing the ways he was growing and learning. Scriptures that Augustine had made fun of were becoming alive to him. For example, the Genesis creation teaching that God made man in his image was something that Augustine had mocked. Augustine thought the idea that God was confined in space, with limited hands, feet, and a head was ridiculous. Yet, through the sermons of Ambrose, Augustine first began to understand that this passage taught about the spiritual making of man. That man is made in God's image, even though man is contained in space (6:3:4).

Augustine continued to grow through Ambrose's teaching, but refused still to "fall headlong" and commit to the faith. Augustine first wanted to be certain of the truth of faith.

For sometime, Augustine led a life straddling the fence of morality, going to church, listening to sermons, even enjoying them, but not committing his life to God. In fact, it was during this time his longtime lover returned to Africa. Augustine found another woman to use for his lustful purposes, and refused to marry anyone, lest they get in the way of his “joyful” life of philosophy! Augustine’s soul was in torment, but God worked through his friends and job to start showing him he had not only misunderstood scripture, but had also fallen short as a philosopher. Augustine began to integrate the scriptural teaching he had to the philosophy he taught and studied.

In this process, Augustine finally started growing from his pride and learning a bit of humility. He began to see Christ as not only an incredible man, but also a man of humility and virtue. From here, he began to realize the divinity of Christ. Even though Augustine would write that he was seeing only “in a glass, in a dark manner,” Augustine recognized the truth of the Christian faith. Knowing it, Augustine was still not ready to follow it!

At this point in his early 30’s, Augustine started spending time with Ambrose’s father in the faith, Simplicianus! Another Christian, Ponticianus, spent some time with Augustine and taught him about the life of St. Antony (see earlier lesson in Church History Literacy on Antony).

Augustine had a real accounting of himself and realized that he was quite a wretched man. His arguments against faith were “used up.” He was in the difficult position of knowing truth, but not embracing it. As a 32-year old man, it was tough to come to grips with accepting Jesus not only as divine, but also as Lord of his own life.

Augustine went off by himself to figure out this intense struggle and his “monstrous state” with its “shifting tides of indecision” (8:8:20 and 8:9:21). As he contemplated turning the corner and giving his life to God, his old habits and sins delayed him. “I hesitated to tear myself away, and shake myself free of them, and leap over to that place I was called to be.” His “overpowering” habits “kept saying to me, ‘Do you think you can live without them?’” (8:11:26)

In tears, Augustine picked up a Bible and turned to Romans 13. He read verses 13 and 14:

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Augustine later recounted, “No further wished I to read, nor was there need to do so. Instantly, in truth, at the end of this sentence, as if before a peaceful light streaming into my heart, all the dark shadows of doubt fled away.” Augustine went at once and told his mother. On Easter Sunday 387, Ambrose baptized Augustine.

Next week, we will go through some of the many ways that Augustine affected the church, not only in his day, but also in ours! You will hear some ideas and phrases that are familiar to you, even though you may not have known they came from the pen of Augustine!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Augustine’s confession begins with a Psalm of praise. What a good example for us! Psalm 7:17 – “I will give praise to the Lord because of His righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the Lord most High.”
2. We can be forgiven for previous transgressions and go on to be VERY effective servants for our Lord. 1 John 1:9 – “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from ALL unrighteousness.”
3. Pray every day for our children. It accomplishes a lot. James 5:16b – “...The prayer of a righteous man (or woman) is powerful and effective.”
4. When God calls you, answer. Accepting Christ is as simple as answering that call. Simply pray/talk to God with confession of your sin and trust in the sacrifice of Christ.
5. Mentor those around you. God works through who you are, what you do, and what you say.