

Augustine

CONFESSIONS

Translated, with
Introduction and Notes, by
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Book One

The story begins with infancy and boyhood, but the telling of the story begins with praise to God. Augustine struggles to find words by which to fulfill the deep desire of the human heart to praise God, just as the infant Augustine will struggle to find words to express the desires of his body—the Latin word for infancy, *infantia*, is literally “speechlessness”—and the boy Augustine will struggle to master words in the service of ambition. Augustine acknowledges God’s gifts in every aspect of his early life; he also acknowledges the misuse of those gifts, which—just like words themselves—are no less good for being misused; their misuse is lamentable precisely because they are good.

Augustine opens with praise to God and meditation on God’s nature (1.1.1–1.5). He recalls the gifts that sustained him in his infancy and the sin that is manifest even in infants (1.6.7–1.7.12). In his boyhood (1.8.13–1.19.30) he learns to speak (1.8.13) and begins his studies (1.9.14–1.10.16, 1.13.20–1.18.29); his baptism is deferred (1.11.17–1.12.19), and he already manifests the sins of lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, and worldly ambition (1.19.30). Nevertheless, Augustine thanks God for the gifts of his infancy and boyhood (1.20.31).

1.1 Great are you, Lord, and highly to be praised. Great is your power, and your wisdom is beyond measure. And human beings want to praise you—they who are just a portion of your creation, who carry around their mortality, who carry around the evidence of their own sin and the evidence that you resist the proud. And yet human beings, this portion of your creation, want to praise you. You rouse them to take delight in praising you: for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it comes to rest in you.

Ps. 47:2, 95

Ps. 146:5

Pron. 3:34

1 Pet. 5

Grant to me, Lord, that I may know and understand whether we must call upon you before we praise you, and know you before we call upon you. But who calls upon you without knowing you? One who calls upon you without knowing you is apt to call upon something altogether different. Or do we instead call upon you in order that we may know you? Yet how will they call upon one in whom they have not believed? And how will they believe without a preacher? And those who seek the Lord will praise him, for those who seek him find him, and those who find him will praise him. Let me seek you, Lord, by calling upon you; let me call upon you by believing in you; for you have been preached to us. It is my faith, Lord, that calls upon you: the faith

Ps. 104:1

Rom. 10:1

Ps. 21:27,

par. Lk.

that you have given me, that you inspired in me through the humanity of your Son, through the ministry of your Preacher.¹

2.2 And how will I call upon my God, my God and my Lord? For surely I call him into myself when I call upon him.² And what place is there in me for my God to come into me? Where shall God come into me, God who made heaven and earth? Is it truly so, Lord my God? Is there something in me that can contain you? Do even heaven and earth, which you made, and in which you made me, contain you? Or does it turn out that whatever is contains you, because without you whatever is would not be? And so because I too am, why am I asking you to come into me, who would not be unless you were in me? I am not hell, after all; and yet even in hell, you are present; for if I descend into hell, you are there. I would not be, my God, I would not be at all if you were not in me. Or is it rather that I would not be if I were not in you, from whom, through whom, and in whom are all things? This too, Lord; this too. What place do I call you into, when I am in you? From what place do you come into me? To what place beyond heaven and earth may I retreat so that my God can come into me there, my God who said, "I fill heaven and earth"?

Gn. 1:1

Ps. 138:8

Rom. 11:36; 1
Cor. 8:6

Jer. 23:24

3.3 Then do heaven and earth contain you, because you fill them? Or do you fill them and something remains, because they do not contain you? And into what do you pour out what remains of you after heaven and earth have been filled? Or have you, who contain all things, no need to be contained in any place, because it is by containing them that you fill the things you fill? They are not vessels that are full of you and thereby give you shape and solidity; if they are shattered, you are not poured out. And when you are poured out over us, you do not run down to the lowest level, but instead you lift us up to the heights; you are not dispersed, but instead you gather us into one. But you, the whole of you, fill all the things you fill, and you fill all things. Or, because all things cannot contain the whole of you, do they contain some part of you, and all things contain the same part of you at the same time? Or does each thing contain a different part, bigger things containing bigger parts and smaller things smaller parts? So then is one

Acts 2:17, 2:18;
2:28–29; Is.

Ps. 145:8

1. Who is "your Preacher"? Some say Ambrose, but how would Augustine expect his readers to recognize an allusion to someone he has not even mentioned yet? (Chadwick cites Letter 147.23.52, but Augustine does not in fact call Ambrose "Preacher" there.) The most natural reading in context is that "the ministry of your Preacher" is parallel to "the humanity of your Son." Augustine is saying that the Incarnation is God's "fundamental act of revelation" (O'Donnell I:17), and the Preacher is the Incarnate Word.

2. "Call upon" is *invocare*; "call . . . into" is *vocare in*.

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part of you bigger than another? Or are you everywhere as a whole, and no thing contains the whole of you?

4.4 What are you, then, my God? What are you, I ask, if not the Lord God? For who is the Lord besides the Lord? Who is God besides our God? O highest, best, most powerful, most all-powerful, most merciful and most just, most hidden and most present, most beautiful and most steadfast, unwavering and incomprehensible, unchangeable but changing all things, never new, never old, making all things new and bringing old age upon the proud, though they know it not: you are always at work, always at rest, gathering, but not from any need, upholding and filling and protecting, creating and nourishing and bringing to maturity, going forth to seek even though you lack nothing. You love and do not burn with passion; you are jealous and free from anxiety; you repent and do not sorrow; you are angry and undisturbed. You change your works and do not change your plan. You take back what you find and have never lost. Though never in need, you are glad of gain; though never greedy, you demand interest. People offer you more than is required so that they will make a debtor of you, and yet who has anything that is not already yours? You repay debts, though you owe no one anything; you cancel debts but lose nothing. And what have we said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What does anyone say when speaking of you? But woe to those who keep silent about you, for though they prattle on and on, they are mute in all that matters.³

Pt. 17:32

Jer. 32:19;

11:33 /

7:27

Job 9:5

Ex. 20:5, 3

2:18; Zc

8:2 / Gk

1 Kg. 1

4:14; D

Mt. 25:27

Lk. 10:35

1 Cor. 4:7

Jn. 11:25;

Pt. 31:3

5.5 Who will grant me rest in you? To whom shall I appeal for you to come into my heart and so intoxicate it that I forget what is bad in myself and embrace you, my one good? What are you for me? Have mercy, that I may speak. What am I to you that you command me to love you, and if I do not, you are angry with me and threaten me with overwhelming misery? Is not my very failure to love you great misery in itself? Woe is me! Tell me, Lord, through your acts of mercy, what

Pt. 106:8;

106:21,

3. Literally: "for the talkative are mute" (*quoniam loquaces muti sunt*). My translation follows the interpretation given by O'Donnell (and borrows some of his language). Augustine frequently describes the Manichees (though not only them) as talkative, a fault he associates with curiosity and vanity. The point here is that those who say nothing about God—they may use the word "God" but they never succeed in saying anything true about the real God—spout a lot of words about other things but are hopelessly tongue-tied about the one crucial subject ("human beings want to praise you"). An alternative interpretation, frequently adopted, is that "those who say most say nothing" that is, nothing genuinely worthy of God, who is beyond our capacity to describe. But in that case it is hard to see how the second part of the sentence provides a reason for the first part, as the conjunction "for" (*quoniam*) requires. How is the impossibility of speaking worthily about God a reason to condemn those who keep silent? Shouldn't it be just the opposite?

you are to me. Say to my soul, "I am your salvation." Speak these words in such a way that I can hear them. Even now the ears of my heart are before you, Lord. Open them, and say to my soul, "I am your salvation"; I will chase after the sound until I have you in my grasp. Do not hide your face from me. Let me die, lest I die,⁴ that I might see your face.

Ps. 34:3

5.6 The house of my soul is too small for you to enter: make it spacious. It is in shambles: restore it. There are things in it that you grieve to look upon: I acknowledge and know this. But who will make it clean? It is to you, and to no other, that I cry out, "Cleanse me, O Lord, from the hidden faults that come from within me, and spare your servant from those that come from without."⁵ I believe, and because I believe, I speak, Lord: this you know. In your presence, my God, I have spoken judgment against myself for my sins, and you have forgiven the ungodliness of my heart. I do not contend in judgment with you, who are Truth itself; nor would I deceive myself, lest my iniquity lie to itself. So I do not contend in judgment with you: for if you, Lord, should make note of iniquities, O Lord, who will endure it?

Deut. 31:17, 32

/ Ex. 33:23

Is. 49:20

Ex. 36:10, 36:3

Ps. 18:13–14

Ps. 115:10; 2 C
4:13

Ps. 31:5 / Jer. 2:

Jn. 14:6

Ps. 26:12

Ps. 129:3

6.7 Yet even so, allow me to speak in the presence of your mercy; dust and ashes though I am, allow me to speak. For truly it is to your mercy that I am speaking, and not to human beings who mock me. Perhaps you, too, mock me; but you will turn and have mercy on me. For what do I want to say, Lord, except that I do not know from where I came here, into this—what shall I call it?—this life that dies, this death that lives? I do not know. The comforts of your acts of mercy upheld me, as I have heard from the parents of my flesh, from whom and in whom⁶ you formed me in time; for I do not remember. The comforts of human milk welcomed me; neither my mother nor my nurses filled their own breasts, but you, through them, provided the nourishment of my infancy in the way that you have appointed, through the riches that you have provided even for the lowest of things. It was your gift as well that I did not want more than you gave, your gift that those who

Gn. 18:27; Job
42:6 VLPs. 70:20; Jer.
12:15

4. Sermon 213.3.3: "Now someone who has not yet died or been resurrected is still living badly; and if he is living badly, he is not alive. Let him die, lest he die. What does this mean, 'Let him die, lest he die'? Let him be changed, lest he be damned. . . . 'For you are dead, and your life is hidden with Christ in God' (Col. 3:3)."

5. Augustine interprets "the hidden faults that come from within" as sins that arise in the natural course of our own thinking (*spontanea cogitatione*) and "those that come from without" as those we commit at the suggestion or persuasion of someone else (*persuasione alterius*). See *De lib. arb.* 3.10.29, *Enarr. in Ps. en.* 1.14 and *en.* 2.13.

6. The first "whom" is masculine, referring to Augustine's father; the second is feminine, referring to his mother.

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nourished me wanted to give me what you had given them—for so well-ordered was their affection that they wanted to give to me out of the abundance they had received from you. It was good for them that I should have from them what was good for me, a good that came not from them, but through them. Indeed all good things come from you, God, and from my God comes all my salvation. It was only later that I came to know all this, when you cried out to me through these very things that you bestow both within and without. But in those early days all I knew was how to suck, to be content with bodily pleasures, and to cry over bodily pain: nothing more.

6.8 Later I also began to smile, first when I was asleep but then when I was awake. For so I have been told about myself, and I believe it, since we see other infants do so; of course I do not remember these things about myself. Little by little I became aware of where I was, and I wanted to make my desires apparent to those who could satisfy them, but I could not: for my desires were inside me, whereas they were outside, and no sense of theirs could give them entry into my soul. And so I tossed out gestures and noises, signs like my desires—such small and weak signs as I was able to make—and indeed they were not really like my desires. And when my elders did not do as I demanded, either because they did not understand me or because it would not have been good for me, I was furious that my betters were not under my control, that free people were not my servants, and I took my revenge on them by crying. The infants whom I have had the opportunity to observe have taught me that infants are like this. Unaware of it as they are, they are the ones who have informed me that I too was like this, more than my nurses, who knew me.

6.9 And now my infancy is long dead, but I am alive. But you, Lord, who are always alive, in whom nothing dies—because before the beginning of the ages, before anything that can be called “before,” you are, and you are the God and Lord of all you have created, and in you the causes of all feeble things stand firm, the sources of all changeable things abide unchangeably, and the reasons of all reasonless and temporal things live eternally—answer my prayer, O God, and in your pity tell me, pitiable as I am, whether there was an earlier age of mine that died and gave way to infancy. Was it the age that I spent in my mother’s womb? I have been told something about that age as well, and I have seen pregnant women myself. And what about the time before that, my sweetness, my God? Was I somewhere? Was I someone? I have no one who can tell me about such things: neither my father nor my mother could, nor yet the experience of others or my own memory. Or do you

laugh at me for asking these questions and command me instead to praise you and give thanks to you for what I do know?

Pt. 36:13

6.10 I give thanks to you, Lord of heaven and earth, praising you for my earliest days and my infancy, which I do not remember. You have left it to human beings to infer these things about themselves from what they see of others, and to believe many things about themselves on the authority even of lowly women. Even then I was and I lived, and already as my infancy was coming to a close I was looking for signs by which to make my ideas known to others. From where could such an animal come if not from you, Lord? Can anyone be the artisan who fashions himself? Or is there any other spring from which being and living flow into us besides your making us, Lord? For you, being and living are not two different things, because supremely being and supremely living are the Selfsame.⁷ You are supreme being and you do not change. In you there is no “today” that runs its full length and comes to an end—and yet today does run its full length and come to an end in you, because all these things, too, are in you; and there would be no paths by which they could pass away if you did not contain them. And because your years do not fail, your years are a “today.” How many days—our own days and those of our ancestors—have already passed through your today! From your today they received their boundaries and existed in the way that you prescribed; still other days will succeed them, and they too will receive their boundaries from your today and exist as you prescribe. But you are the Selfsame, and it is today that you will accomplish, today that you have accomplished, all that is yet to come tomorrow in the ages beyond, and all that belonged to yesterday and to the yet more distant past. What is it to me if someone fails to understand this? May even those who ask “What is this?” rejoice. May they rejoice even in their perplexity; may they be glad that in failing to find their answers they have found you, rather than finding answers but missing you.

*Mt. 11:25 par.
10:21*

Pt. 4:9

Rom. 11:36

Pt. 101:28

Pt. 101:28

*Ex. 13:14; Sir.
39:26*

7.11 Hear my prayer, O God. Alas for human sins! And a human being says these things, and you have mercy on him, because you made him and did not make sin in him. Who will recount for me the sin of my infancy? For in your eyes no one is free from sin, not even the infant who has lived but one day on the earth. Who will recount them

Pt. 54:2 / Is. 1:1

Job 14:4–5

7. Augustine takes “the Selfsame” to be a name for God as immutable Being itself, in line with the divine self-revelation of Exodus 3:14, “I am who I am.” The word also occurs in the *Confessions* at 7.9.14 in emphatic affirmation of the divinity of Christ (“since he is by nature the very same as God,” *quia naturaliter idipsum est*) as well as at 9.4.11, 9.10.24, and 12.7.7.

you had already begun to build your temple in my mother's heart and laid the foundation of your holy dwelling place; but my father was a catechumen, and a recent one at that. And so she was seized with holy fear and trembling, and although I was not yet a believer, she feared the misshapen paths followed by those who turn their back to you rather than their face.

*1 Cor. 3:16-17**Sir. 24:14**Jer. 2:27*

3.7 Alas for me! And do I dare to say that you, my God, were silent as I went further and further away from you? Did you really say nothing to me in those days? The winsome words that you spoke into my ears through your faithful servant, my mother: whose words were they, if not yours? But they did not make their way from my ears into my heart, so that I might act as they urged me to do. For it was her desire—and I remember how she admonished me privately and with great anxiety—that I should avoid fornication and, above all, that I should not commit adultery with another man's wife. Womanly admonitions, I thought them; I would have been embarrassed to obey them. But no: they were yours, and I knew it not. I thought you were keeping silent and she was the one speaking; but you were not silent; you were speaking through her, and in scorning her I was scorning you—I, her son, the son of your handmaid, I, your servant. But I knew it not. I rushed ahead, so blind that among those of my own age I was ashamed of being less vicious than they were. For I would hear them boasting of their crimes: the more disgraceful the act, the more they boasted. So I had pleasure not only in doing what I wanted to do but also in the praise I received for having done it.

Ps. 115:16

What deserves reproach, if not vice? But I became more vicious in order to escape reproach, and when I had nothing to admit that would have put me on the same level as those who were lost, I would pretend to have done what I had not done, lest I should appear contemptible because I was more innocent and be looked down upon because I was more chaste.

3.8 What companions I had as I walked the streets of Babylon and wallowed in its filth as if it were spices and precious ointments! And as I clung more and more tenaciously to its very center, the invisible enemy trampled me underfoot and seduced me—for I was ripe for seduction. And the mother of my flesh, though she had fled from the center of Babylon, lingered still in its outskirts. Though she admonished me to be chaste, she was not concerned about what she heard about me from her husband. She thought it would be burdensome for the present and dangerous for the future if I were restrained within the limits of marital affection (assuming my lust could not be cut down to the quick). She

*Rev. 17:5**Jer. 38:22 / Song
4:14**Jer. 51:6*

made no effort to get me married because she was afraid that being shackled to a wife would interfere with my hopes: not the hope that my mother had of life with you in the age to come, but hopes for my literary career. I could not tell which of my parents was more determined that I should have such a career: my father, who thought hardly at all about you and thought trivialities about me, or my mother, who thought that the usual course of study in that field would not merely do no harm but would actually help me appreciably in coming to you. At any rate, so I conjecture from what I remember of my parents' characters. And the reins were slackened to let me dissipate myself amidst various affections, with no stern hand to put me in check. All these things were a dense fog cutting me off from the brightness of your truth, O my God, and my iniquity burst out as from fatness.

Ps. 72:7

4.9 Certainly, O Lord, your law punishes theft; and it is a law written upon human hearts, a law that not even iniquity itself erases. After all, what thief will tolerate another thief? Even a rich thief will not put up with someone who steals out of need. And yet I willed to steal, and I carried out the theft, driven by no neediness except that I was bereft of justice—which I loathed—and crammed full of iniquity. For I stole something of which I already had plenty, and much better than what I stole. Nor did I want to enjoy the thing that I desired to steal; what I wanted to enjoy was the theft itself, the sin.

Ex. 20:15; Deut.
5:19 / Rom.
2:14–15

There was a pear tree near our vineyard, laden with fruit that was not enticing in either appearance or taste. One wretched night—it was our unhealthy custom to keep up our games in the streets well into the night, and we had done so then—a band of altogether worthless young men set out to shake that tree and run off with its fruit. We took away an enormous haul, not for our own food but to throw to the pigs. Perhaps we ate something, but even if we did, it was for the fun of doing what was not allowed that we took the pears. Behold my heart, O God; behold my heart, on which you had mercy in the depths of that abyss. Behold, let my heart tell you now what it was seeking there: seeking in such a way that I would be wicked for no reason, so that there would be no cause for my wickedness but wickedness itself. It was foul, this wickedness, and yet I loved it. I loved perishing. I loved my own falling away: I did not love the thing into which I fell, but the fall itself. In my very soul I was vile, and I leapt down from your stronghold into destruction, not striving for something disgraceful, but seeking disgrace.

Gn. 3:6

Mt. 7:6; Lk. 15:15

Ps. 70:3

5.10 Truly there is a loveliness in beautiful bodies, in gold and silver and all the rest; in fleshly touch there is great power in harmony;

and each of the other senses has a bodily quality accommodated to it. Honor in this age and the power to command and subdue have their splendor; from them arises the eagerness to exact vengeance. And yet in striving after all these things we must not depart from you, O Lord, or stray from your law. The life that we live here has an attractiveness all its own because of the due measure of its beauty and its fitting relation to all these things that are the lowest of beautiful objects. Human friendship, too, is sweet in its precious bond because it makes many souls one. On account of all these things, and others like them, we make room for sin: because of our ungoverned inclination toward these things—for though they are goods, they are the lowest goods—we abandon the better and the highest goods; we abandon you, O Lord our God, and your truth and your law. For even those lowest things have their delights, but not like my God, who created all things; for the righteous delight in God, and he is the delight of those who are upright in heart.

Gn. 1:1

Ps. 63:11

5.11 When a question arises about why some criminal act was done, people do not typically accept any explanation until it appears that there was a desire to attain, or a fear of losing, one of those goods that we have called the lowest goods. These are beautiful and becoming, though they are abject and contemptible in comparison with the higher goods that bring true happiness. Someone has committed murder. Why did he do it? He loved his victim's wife or estate, or he wanted to steal enough to live on, or he was afraid of losing something to his victim, or he was burning to revenge himself on someone who had injured him. Surely no one has ever committed murder simply because he delighted in murder itself! Who would believe such a thing? Even for that savage and most cruel man of whom it was said that he was wicked and cruel for no reason, a cause is nonetheless stated: "lest through idleness," it says, "his hand or spirit should become useless."³ And ask again: "Why did he do this?" It was so that once he seized the city through the practice of his crimes, he might obtain honors, powers, and riches, and he would be free from the law and "from the burden of the poverty of his estate—and his own consciousness of the guilt of his crimes."⁴ So not even Catiline loved his crimes; he loved something else that was the cause of his committing those crimes.

6.12 What did I—wretch that I was—love in you, my theft, my crime by night in my sixteenth year? You were not beautiful, for you

3. Sallust, *Catil.* 16.3.

4. Sallust, *Catil.* 5.7.

were a theft. Or are you indeed anything at all, so that I might speak to you?

Those pears that we stole were beautiful, for they were created by you, O most beautiful of all, Creator of all, good God, God my supreme good and my true good. Those pears were beautiful, but they were not what my wretched soul lusted after. After all, I had plenty of better pears; I picked those merely in order to steal. The pears that I had plucked I threw away. The only thing I tasted from them was iniquity; enjoying that was what made me happy. For even if something from those pears did enter my mouth, it was the crime that gave it savor. And now, O Lord my God, I am asking what delighted me in that theft, and behold! there is no beauty there. I do not merely mean such beauty as is found in equity and practical wisdom, or in the human mind and memory and the senses and the life of the body; not even as the stars are beautiful and adorn their proper places, as the earth and the sea are beautiful, teeming with new lives that are born to take the place of things that are passing away—it lacked even the abortive and shadowy beauty of deceptive vices.

6.13 For pride mimics loftiness, when in fact you are the one God, Most High above all things. What does ambition seek but honors and glory, when in fact you are the one who is to be honored before all things and are glorious unto eternity? The cruelty of the powerful is meant to inspire fear, but who is to be feared except the one God? And in what respect can his power be curtailed or lessened, when or where or how or by whom? The enticements of the lustful are meant to arouse love, but nothing is more enticing than your charity, and no love is more wholesome than the love of your Truth, which surpasses all things in beauty and splendor. Curiosity makes a show of zeal for knowledge, when in fact it is you who supremely know all things. Even ignorance and stupidity are concealed under the name of simplicity and harmlessness. For nothing simpler than you can be found; and what is more harmless than you, since it is their own works that are the enemies of the wicked? Idleness desires rest, but what rest is there apart from the Lord? Luxury would like to be called repletion and wealth, but you are fullness and the never-failing abundance of incorruptible sweetness. Extravagance masquerades as generosity, but you are the supremely bountiful giver of all good things. Avarice wants to possess many things, but you possess everything. Envy struggles for preeminence. What is more preeminent than you? Anger seeks vengeance. Who exacts vengeance more justly than you? Fear shrinks from unexpected and sudden threats to things it loves, while it takes precautions

Rom. 12:19

to keep them secure. What is unexpected to you? What is sudden? Or who will separate you from what you love? Or where, except in you, is unfaltering security? Sadness pines for things it has lost, things that cupidity had delighted in. It would wish to lose nothing, as nothing can be taken away from you.

Rom. 8:35

6.14 Thus the soul commits fornication when it turns away from you and seeks outside you those things that it cannot find pure and unadulterated unless it returns to you. All those who place themselves far from you and exalt themselves against you are perversely imitating you. But even in this way, by imitating you they declare that you are the Creator of all of nature, and so there is nowhere they can flee from you altogether.

Ps. 72:27

What, then, did I love in that theft of mine, and in what way was I viciously, perversely, imitating my Lord? Did it please me to act against your law, at least by deceit—since I could not do so by force—and thus mimic the curtailed freedom of a prisoner by getting away with doing what was not permitted, in a shadowy likeness of omnipotence? Look at that slave, fleeing his master and chasing after a shadow. What rottenness! What a monstrous life, and what an abyss of death! Could he do, freely, what was not permitted, for no other reason than that it was not permitted?

Job 7:2

7.15 What shall I offer to the Lord in thanksgiving for recalling these things to my memory in such a way that my soul is not made fearful thereby? I will love you, Lord, and give thanks to you and confess to your Name, because you have forgiven me for such wicked and abominable deeds. I owe it to your grace and to your mercy that you have melted my sins like ice. To your grace I owe also whatever evil things I did not do: for what was I not capable of doing, I who loved even crime for no reason at all? And I acknowledge that I have been forgiven for all these things, both those I did of my own accord and those I refrained from doing because you were guiding me.

*Ps. 115:12**Ps. 53:8**Sin. 3:17*

Who among human beings, seeing how feeble they are, would dare to ascribe their chastity or innocence to their own powers and so love you less, as though they had less need of your mercy, by which you forgive the sins of those who turn to you? As for those who have been called by you and have followed your voice and have avoided the things they have read about me, the things that I have recorded and acknowledged about myself, let them not mock me because I have been healed by the same physician who was present with them so that they did not fall ill—or rather, so that they were less gravely ill. And let them therefore love you as much—no, let them love you even more—because

Ps. 50:15

they see that he who has rescued me from the great infirmities of my sins has kept them from being ensnared by such great infirmities of sin.

8.16 What fruit had I then, wretch that I was, in these things that I now blush to recall, and especially in that theft in which I loved the theft itself, and nothing else, when indeed the theft was nothing and I was all the more wretched on account of it? And yet I would not have done it by myself—this is how I remember my state of mind—I would certainly not have done it by myself. So I also loved the companionship of those with whom I did it. So is it true after all that I loved nothing other than the theft? To be sure, I loved nothing else, since that companionship too is nothing. What is it, really? (Who is it that teaches me, but the one who enlightens my heart and pierces its shadows?) What is it? I am impelled to ask this question and discuss it and ponder it, because if I had loved the fruit that I stole and wanted to enjoy it, I could have done that even if I had been by myself; if I had been after only the thrill of committing the evil act, I would not have inflamed the itch of my cupidity by rubbing up against souls who shared my guilt. But since there was no pleasure for me in the pears, the pleasure was in the crime itself, and it was my companionship with fellow sinners that created this pleasure.

Rom. 6:21

Sir. 2:10; Eph. 1:18

9.17 What was that disposition of mind? It was most assuredly very base, and plainly so; and woe is me that I had it. But what was it? Who understands sins? It was a joke; our hearts were tickled that we were deceiving people who did not expect us to do such things and fervently wanted us not to. Why, then, did it please me that I was not doing it by myself? Is it that no one is easily moved to laughter when alone? Not easily, perhaps, but still, a laugh will sometimes get the better of people when they are quite alone and no one else is around, if something quite ridiculous strikes their senses or their mind. But I would not have done it by myself. I would certainly not have done it by myself. Behold before you, my God, this living recollection of my soul. If I had been by myself, I would not have done that theft in which what pleased me was not what I stole, but that I stole; it would not have pleased me to do it alone, and I would not have done it. O you too unfriendly friendship, unsearchable seduction of the mind! Out of playing and joking came a passion to do harm and a desire to damage someone else without any gain for myself, without any lust for revenge! But when someone says, "Let's go, let's do it," we are ashamed not to be shameless.

Job 10:15 VL

Ps. 18:13

Num 10:9

10.18 Who will unloose this most twisted, this most tangled intricacy? It is foul: I shrink from considering it; I do not want to look upon

it. I want to look upon you, beautiful and seemly justice and innocence, with honorable eyes and with a desire that is always satisfied but never sated. In your presence there is rest indeed, and a life that knows no disturbance. Those who enter into you enter into the joy of their Lord; they will not be afraid, and all will be supremely well with them as they dwell in the one who is supremely good. I deserted you and wandered away, my God, very much astray from your steadfastness in my youth; and I became for myself a land of destitution.

*Mt. 25:21**Ps. 118:176**Lk. 15:13-14*

If you are ashamed to follow my example, do not stand in my way.” His friend replied that he would be his steadfast companion for so great a reward in so great a service. Both of them were already building a tower for you at a fitting cost: leaving behind all that was theirs and following you.

Lk. 14:28–33

Mt. 19:27; Lk.

5:11, 5:28

Ponticianus and the friend who was walking with him through other parts of the garden went looking for them. They arrived at the same place and, finding their two friends, encouraged them to return, because it was getting late in the day. But their friends told them about their decision and resolution, explaining how such a will had arisen in them and become firmly fixed. They asked them at least not to stand in their way if they were unwilling to join them. Ponticianus and his companion were in no way changed from their prior state, but nonetheless they wept for their friends, as he told us, and offered them devout congratulations, commending themselves to their prayers. Ponticianus and his companion returned to the palace, dragging their hearts in the earth; their two friends remained in the house, their hearts attached to heaven. Both of them were engaged, and when their fiancées heard all this, they likewise devoted their virginity to you.

Lk. 9:12, 24:29

7.16 Ponticianus went on telling his story. But as he spoke, you, O Lord, were wrenching me toward myself. All the time that I had refused to look honestly at myself, I had turned my back upon myself; but you wrested me away from that position and set me before my own face, so that I would see how wicked I was, how misshapen and filthy, covered with spots and sores. I saw it, and I recoiled in horror, and there was nowhere I could flee from myself. But if I tried to avert my gaze from myself, he went on telling his story, and you once again resisted me and forced me to look at myself so that I would find out my iniquity and hate it. I had known it all along, but I disguised it, repressed it, and put it out of my mind.

Jer. 2:27

Ps. 49:21

Ps. 35:3

7.17 But now the more ardently I loved those whose wholesome resolutions I was hearing about, who had given themselves entirely to you to be healed, the more I came to hate and loathe myself in comparison with them. For so many years of my life had slipped away from me—twelve years, perhaps—since I had read Cicero’s *Hortensius* in my nineteenth year and was roused to devote myself to wisdom, and I delayed scorning earthly happiness to be at leisure to search out wisdom. The mere search for wisdom, let alone the actual finding of it, was worth more than finding all the treasures of the kings of the nations and having my fill of the pleasures of the body. But wretched as I was in my youth—wretched at the very outset of my youth—I had

nonetheless asked you for chastity. I said, "Give me chastity and continence: but not yet." For I was afraid that you would heed my prayer in that very moment, and in that very moment heal me from the sickness of concupiscence, which I wanted to be satisfied, not snuffed out. I continued to walk in the depraved paths of superstitious sacrilege, not indeed because I was certain in them but merely because I preferred them to other paths. Those other paths I did not seek out piously; no, I set myself up as their enemy and contended against them.

Sir. 2:16

7.18 I had thought that I was putting off, day after day, scorning the hope of this present world and following you alone because I had not found anything certain by which I could direct my course. Now the day had come on which I was stripped naked before myself, and my conscience spoke plainly to me: "What, nothing more to say? You always said you were unwilling to cast aside the burden of your emptiness because you were not certain of the truth. But look now: you are certain, and still your burden presses upon you, while people not wearied by the search, who have not been contemplating these things for ten years and more, have received wings on freer shoulders." All this gnawed away at my innermost self, and I was violently distressed with fearsome shame, while Ponticianus went on speaking of such things. But when he had finished talking and accomplished the business on which he had come, he went away, and I was left by myself.

Sir. 5:8

Ps. 54:7

Was there anything I had not said to myself? Were there any words left that I had not used to whip my soul into following me as I tried to go after you? It fought back, it resisted, but it found no excuse for itself. All its arguments were used up and defeated. What was left was a speechless dread: my soul feared being restrained from the easy flow of habit, feared this as if it were death itself, though by its habit it was wasting away unto death.

8.19 I had powerfully awakened great strife in our chamber, my heart; and in the midst of this contention in my inner dwelling place the turmoil in my mind showed in my face, and I accosted Alypius and exclaimed, "What is wrong with us? What is this? The unlearned are rising up and taking hold of heaven, and we, with all our learning: look at us, wallowing in flesh and blood! Are we ashamed to follow them because they went first, and not ashamed to refuse to follow them at all?" I said something or other like this, and then my vexation tore me away from him as he looked at me in silent astonishment—for I no longer sounded like my usual self. My brow, my cheeks, my eyes, my color, the tone of my voice all expressed my mind more eloquently than did the words that I uttered.

Mt. 6:6

1 Cor. 15:50

There was a small garden at our host's house, and we had the use of it along with the whole house, for our host, the master of the house, did not live there. The tumult of my feelings drove me out there, where no one would intervene in the fiery attack that I had launched against myself, until it was finished. What the outcome would be, you knew, but I did not. I was going mad in recovering my sanity, dying unto life, well aware of what evil was in me and unaware of what goodness would come to be in me in just a little while. So I went out into the garden, and Alypius followed close behind me. His presence with me did not intrude upon my privacy, and how could he have left me alone in such a state?

So we sat down as far from the house as we could. I was groaning in spirit, grievously distressed and greatly indignant that I would not enter into the bond and covenant with you, my God, though all my bones cried out for this very thing and praised it to the heavens. The way there was not by ship or carriage or on foot; it did not even require me to go from the house to the place where we had sat down. To go there—even, indeed, to arrive there—required only that I will to go there, but that I will it forcefully and with my whole self, not with a half-wounded will turning and twisting this way and that, struggling between a part that would rise upward and a part that was falling.

*Jn. 11:33**Ps. 34:10*

8.20 At length in the upheavals of my indecision I was making the kinds of bodily gestures that people sometimes want to make but cannot because their limbs are missing or they are bound by chains or undone by fatigue or in some way prevented. If I tore out my hair, if I beat my brow, if I clasped my hands and hugged my knee, I did it because I willed it. But it was possible for me to will these things and yet not do them, if the movement of my limbs were not under my control. So I did all these things, when the will to do them was not the same as the power to do them; and yet I was not doing what I had incomparably greater desire to do, what pleased me far more, even though I had the power to do it as soon as I willed it: for as soon as I would will it, I would will it. The ability, the will, was there, and to will it was already to do it; and yet it was not done, and my body obeyed the most trifling will of my soul and moved its limbs at the will's command more readily than my soul would obey itself and bring to completion this momentous will in the will alone.

9.21 What was the source of this remarkable conflict? How did things come to this pass? Let your mercy shine upon me, and let me inquire; perhaps I will find an answer in the secret hiding places of the punishments that beset human beings, in the darkest shadows of the

griefs of the children of Adam. What was the source of this remarkable conflict? How did things come to this pass? The mind commands the body, and immediately it is obeyed; the mind commands itself, and it is resisted. The mind commands the hand to move, and so great is its control that one can scarcely distinguish the command from the obedience—and the mind is mind, whereas the hand is body. The mind commands the mind to will, and the mind is nothing other than itself, and yet it does not obey. What is the source of this remarkable conflict? How do things come to this pass, so that the mind wills what it would not command unless it willed it, and yet it does not do what it commands?

But it does not will it wholeheartedly, so it does not command wholeheartedly. So far as it wills, it commands; so far as it does not will, the command is not carried out. For what the will is commanding is that a certain will should exist: not some other will, but that very will itself. And so it is not the whole will that commands, and for this reason what it commands does not come to be. For if it were the whole will, it would not command such a will to exist, since it would already exist. So it is not remarkable after all when someone is partly willing and partly unwilling: it is an illness of the mind, because it is so weighed down by habit that it cannot wholly rise up in the truth. And the reason that there are two wills is that neither of them is the whole, and something is present in one that is lacking in the other.

10.22 There are those who observe these two wills in deliberation and conclude that there are two natures, of two minds: one good, one evil. Let them perish at your presence, O God, as empty talkers and seducers of the mind perish. It is they who are truly evil, because they hold these evil views; and they themselves will be good if they hold true views and consent to what is true, so that your Apostle may say to them, "Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." For so long as they will to be light, not in the Lord, but in themselves, by supposing that the nature of the soul is what God is, they have become a deeper darkness; for in their appalling arrogance they have drawn further away from you, the true Light who enlighten every human being who comes into this world. To them I say this: give heed to what you are saying and be ashamed; go to him and you will receive his light, and your face will not be ashamed.

When I was deliberating about whether I would now serve the Lord my God as I had long intended, it was I who willed it, I who failed to will it; it was I. I did not wholly will it; I did not wholly fail to will it. For this reason I was struggling against myself, tearing myself into

Ps. 67:3

Tit. 1:10

Eph. 5:8

Jn. 1:9

Ps. 33:6

Deut. 6:13; Jer.
30:9; Mt. 4:10

fragments, and that fragmentation was happening against my will: yet what it revealed was not the nature of a mind other than my own, but rather the punishment of my own nature. And so this fragmentation was not after all my own doing; it was the work of the sin that dwelt within me as punishment for the sin of one who had been freer than I was: for I was a son of Adam.

Rom. 7:17, 7:20

10.23 For if there are as many contrary natures as there are conflicting wills, there will not be just two, but many. Suppose someone is deliberating whether to go to a Manichee assembly or to the theater. The Manichees will cry out, "Look: two natures, a good nature that is leading him to us, and a bad nature that is leading him elsewhere. What else could be the source of this wavering between opposing wills?" But I say both wills are bad, both the one that leads him to the Manichees and the one that leads him back to the theater, whereas they believe that the one that sends him to them can only be good. What, then, if someone of our fellowship is deliberating and vacillates within himself between two wills that are opposed: will he go to the theater or to our church? Will not the Manichees vacillate about how to answer? Either they will admit what they want to deny—that his will to go to our church is good, just as good as the will of those who have been initiated into the sacraments of the Manichees and trapped there—or they will conclude that two bad natures and two bad minds are in conflict in a single person. And then either their customary answer, that there is one good nature and one bad nature, will not be true, or else they will be turned toward the truth and not deny that when someone deliberates, there is one soul, thrown into turmoil by divergent wills.

10.24 They must no longer say, when they experience two wills striving against each other in a single person, that there are two contrary minds—one good, one evil—contending with each other, deriving from two contrary substances and two contrary principles. For you, O truthful God, refute them; you argue against them and defeat them. Suppose both wills are bad: someone is deliberating whether to kill someone by poisoning or stabbing; whether to seize this or that part of someone else's property, when he cannot seize both; whether to spend money on pleasure in the service of lust or to save money in the service of greed; whether to go to the circus or to the theater, if both have performances on the same day—and I shall add a third: whether to go into someone else's house to rob him, if the occasion arises—even a fourth: to commit adultery, if the opportunity presents itself to do that as well at the same time. If all these things are present at a single moment of time and one desires them all equally but cannot do them all at

*Ps. 85:15; Jn. 3:33;
Rom. 3:14*

the same time, these four—or more—mutually opposed wills tear the mind apart because it desires so many things; but the Manichees do not typically say that the mind is a great multitude of diverse substances.

Likewise in the case of good wills: suppose I ask them, Is it good to take pleasure in reading the Apostle? Is it good to take pleasure in the sober singing of a Psalm? Is it good to discuss the Gospel? To each of these they will reply, “It is good.” So then what if all of them are equally appealing, and at the very same time? Will not divergent wills distend the human heart while we deliberate about which of the three we prefer to have? They are all good, and they are in conflict with one another until one is chosen and the whole will, which was divided into many, is drawn toward it. And so when someone would prefer to rise up to eternity but the pleasure of temporal goods holds him down, it is one and the same soul that does not will either with its whole will; so the soul is torn into pieces in its great distress, as long as it prefers the eternal as truth demands but will not cast away the temporal because it is easy and familiar.

11.25 In this way I was sick and in agony. I brought bitter accusations against myself, much more bitter than ever before, and I squirmed and writhed in my chains until they would be wholly broken and cast off. By now they barely held me, but they did still hold me. And in your severe mercy, O Lord, you rose up in the hidden places of my inmost self and whipped me more and more with the lash of fear and shame so that I would not give up and go back to my old ways, lest I fail to cast off the small and fragile chain that yet remained and it would grow strong again and bind me more powerfully than ever. Inwardly I was saying to myself, “Let it be now; let it be now,” and by saying this I was already on the journey to where I wanted to be. I nearly did it, but I did not do it; yet I did not fall back into my former ways. Instead I stood on the threshold and caught my breath. Once again I made an effort, and I was nearly there—I was nearly there—I was touching it, I had it in my grasp. And then I was not there, not touching it, not grasping it, hesitating to die unto death and live unto life. The evil that had a firm place in me was more powerful than the good to which I was not accustomed. The closer I drew to the moment when I would be changed, the more I was struck with terror. But it did not thrust me back or turn me away; it left me hanging.

11.26 My old loves—utter trifles, the vanities of those who work vanity—held me back. They snatched at the garments of my flesh and whispered, “Are you leaving us behind? From this moment and for ever we will no longer be with you. From this moment and for ever these

Ecc. 1:2

things will no longer be permissible for you." O Lord, may your mercy turn away the soul of your servant from "these things," the things my old loves put before me. How filthy, how dishonorable they were! They were already so far from me that I did not half hear them. They did not confront me openly as I went on my way; in a stifled whisper they nagged at me from behind my back as I walked away and tried to make me look back. Yet even so they slowed me down; I hesitated to tear myself away from them, cut myself off from them, and leap ahead to the place where I was being called, while the violent power of habit asked me, "Do you really think you will be able to live without these things?"

Sir. 5:8

11.27 But by now it was saying all this in a most half-hearted way. For from the place on which I had set my sights, and to which I was afraid to go, the chaste dignity of Continence was revealed to me. Serene, not wantonly joyful, she beckoned to me honorably to come to her and not hesitate. She held out her holy hands to me to take hold of them and embrace her, hands teeming with a host of good examples: so many boys and girls, many youths and people of every age, venerable widows and elderly women who had remained virgins. In all of them Continence herself was revealed, not as in any way sterile, but as the fertile mother of children of joy by you, O Lord, her husband. She laughed at me with the laughter of encouragement, as if to say, "Can you not do what these men and women did? Was it possible for these men and women to do this by their own strength, and not in the Lord their God? The Lord their God gave me to them. Why do you stand still in yourself and not stand firm? Cast yourself upon him! Fear not. He will not withdraw himself from you and let you fall: cast yourself upon him in full assurance! He will catch you and heal you." And I was deeply ashamed, because I still heard the murmur of those trifles, and I was held in suspense, lingering. Again she spoke, as if she were saying, "Close your ears against those unclean members of yours upon the earth, that they may be put to death. They tell you tales of pleasure, but they have nothing to compare with the law of the Lord your God."

*Ps. 112:9**Col. 3:5**Ps. 118:85*

This debate within my heart was nothing less than a struggle of myself against myself. Alypius remained close by my side, waiting in silence for the outcome of this uncommon agitation of mine.

12.28 But as this profound self-examination dredged up all my wretchedness and brought it together in a heap before the eyes of my heart, a great storm arose and brought on a great shower of tears. And so that I could shed them freely and give voice to my sobbing, I arose and left Alypius—solitude seemed more appropriate for me to give

vent to my weeping—and secluded myself in a more remote spot, so that even his presence would not be a burden to me. That is how I felt at the time, and he understood it: there was something in my voice, I think, that made it clear I was ready to break down and cry. And so I arose, and he remained where we had been sitting, thunderstruck.

I stretched out somehow or other under a fig tree¹⁶ and gave full rein to my tears. Rivers streamed forth from my eyes, an acceptable sacrifice to you. And I said many things to you—not indeed in these words, but this was the meaning: “How long, O Lord? How long, O Lord; will you be angry for ever? Remember not our sins of old.” For I felt the strength of my sins holding me back. I gave voice to cries of wretchedness: “How long—how long—will I go on saying, ‘Tomorrow and tomorrow’? Why not right now? Why can my wickedness not come to an end at this very hour?”

Mt. 21:19; Jn.

1:47–48

Ps. 50:19

Ps. 6:4

Ps. 78:5 / Ps. 78:8

12.29 I said these things and wept most bitter tears in the brokenness of my heart. Then suddenly I heard a voice from next door—a boy’s voice or a girl’s, I do not know—singing, repeating again and again, “Pick up and read, pick up and read.” At once my countenance was changed and I began to think most intently about whether there was any sort of game in which children would say something like that. I could not recall ever having heard it before, so I stopped the flow of my tears and arose, taking this to be no less than a divine voice commanding me to open a book and read whatever passage I first came upon. For I had heard how Antony happened upon the reading of the Gospel and took what he heard as an admonition, as though what was read was said directly to him: “Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven; and come, follow me.” And by such a divine announcement he was turned immediately to you. And so, stirred by this voice, I returned to the place where I had been sitting with Alypius: for I had set down a book of the Apostle there when I got up and left. I snatched it up, opened it, and read in silence the passage that first caught my eye: “not in reveling and drunkenness, not

Ps. 50:19

Mt. 19:21

16. The fig tree is a powerful Scriptural image. In Genesis 3:7 Adam and Eve make coverings of fig leaves for themselves to cover the shame of their nakedness after their fall. Micah 4:4 prophesies that in “the latter days . . . they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid.” (See also Zechariah 3:10.) In Matthew 21:18–20 (par. Mark 11:12–13, 20–21) Jesus curses a barren fig tree, which withers. The budding of the fig tree is a sign of the coming summer in Matthew 24:32 (par. Mark 13:28). In John 1:48 Jesus sees Nathanael under a fig tree before he calls him to be a disciple. Foremost in Augustine’s mind are the allusions to the cursing of the barren fig tree, which speaks of the flesh in need of grace, and the calling of Nathanael, which speaks of that very grace in the making of a disciple.

in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts." I had no desire to read further; there was no need. As soon as I reached the end of this sentence the light of assurance was poured into my heart and all the clouds of doubt melted away.

Rom. 13:13–14

12.30 I closed the book, marking the place by keeping a finger there or in some other way. My face now calm and still, I told Alypius what had happened. He likewise told me what had been happening in him, which I did not know. He asked to see what I had read. I showed him, and he looked further than I had read. I did not know what came next, but it was this: "Welcome the one who is weak in faith." He applied these words to himself and explained this to me. Yet he took strength from this admonition, and without any turmoil of doubt he was joined to me in the wholesome resolution and purpose that was so much in harmony with his accustomed behavior, which for so long had been different from mine, and far better.

Rom. 14:1

From there we went inside to my mother and told her; she was overjoyed. We told her the story of how it happened. She exulted and was triumphant and blessed you, who are able to do more than we ask or understand. For she saw that you had granted me even more than she had so often asked for with sorrowful and tearful cries. For you had so turned me to yourself that I would not look for a wife or for any other hope in this present world. I was standing on that rule of faith on which you had revealed me to her so many years before.¹⁷ You had turned her sorrow into joy more abundantly even than she had desired, a joy much dearer and purer than she could have sought from grandchildren of my flesh.

Eph. 3:20

Ps. 29:12

17. See 3.11.19.