

The Confessions

SAINT AUGUSTINE



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Book I

INFANCY AND BOYHOOD

Opening prayer and meditation

1, 1. Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise,¹ your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning.² And so we humans, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you—we who carry our mortality about with us,³ carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud.⁴ Yet these humans, due part of your creation as they are, still do long to praise you. You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.

Grant me to know and understand, Lord, which comes first: to call upon you or to praise you? To know you or to call upon you? Must we know you before we can call upon you? Anyone who invokes what is still unknown may be making a mistake. Or should you be invoked first, so that we may then come to know you? But how can people call upon someone in whom they do not yet believe? And how can they believe without a preacher?⁵ But scripture tells us that those who seek the Lord will praise him,⁶ for as they seek they find him,⁷ and on finding him they will praise him. Let me seek you, then, Lord, even while I am calling upon you, and call upon you even as I believe in you; for to us you have indeed been preached. My faith calls upon you, Lord, this faith which is your gift to me, which you have breathed into me through the humanity of your Son and the ministry of your preacher.

2, 2. How shall I call upon my God, my God and my Lord, when by the very act of calling upon him I would be calling him into

¹See Ps 47:2 (48:1); 95 (96):4; 144 (145):3.

²See Ps 146 (147):5.

³See 2 Cor 4:10.

⁴See 1 Pt 5:5.

⁵See Rom 10:14.

⁶See Ps 21:27 (22:26).

⁷See Mt 7:7-8; Lk 11:10.

myself? Is there any place within me into which my God might come? How should the God who made heaven and earth⁸ come into me? Is there any room in me for you, Lord, my God? Even heaven and earth, which you have made and in which you have made me—can even they contain you? Since nothing that exists would exist without you, does it follow that whatever exists does in some way contain you? But if this is so, how can I, who am one of these existing things, ask you to come into me, when I would not exist at all unless you were already in me? Not yet am I in hell, after all, but even if I were, you would be there too; for if I descend to the underworld, you are there.⁹ No, my God, I would not exist, I would not be at all, were you not in me. Or should I say, rather, that I should not exist if I were not in you, from whom are all things, through whom are all things, in whom are all things?¹⁰ Yes, Lord, that is the truth, that is indeed the truth. To what place can I invite you, then, since I am in you? Or where could you come from, in order to come into me? To what place outside heaven and earth could I travel, so that my God could come to me there, the God who said, *I fill heaven and earth?*¹¹

3, 3. So then, if you fill heaven and earth, does that mean that heaven and earth contain you? Or, since clearly they cannot hold you, is there something of you left over when you have filled them? Once heaven and earth are full, where would that remaining part of you overflow? Or perhaps you have no need to be contained by anything, but rather contain everything yourself, because whatever you fill you contain, even as you fill it? The vessels which are full of you do not lend you stability, because even if they break you will not be spilt. And when you pour yourself out over us,¹² you do not lie there spilt but raise us up; you are not scattered, but gather us together. Yet all those things which you fill, you fill with the whole of yourself. Should we suppose, then, that because all things are incapable of containing the whole of you, they hold only a part of you, and all of them the same part? Or does each thing hold a different part, greater things larger parts, and lesser things smaller parts? Does it

⁸See Gn 1:1.

⁹See Ps 138 (139):8.

¹⁰See Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6.

¹¹Jer 23:24.

¹²See JI 2:28–29; Acts 2:17–18.

even make sense to speak of larger or smaller parts of you? Are you not everywhere in your whole being, while there is nothing whatever that can hold you entirely?

4, 4. What are you, then, my God? What are you, I ask, but the Lord God? For who else is lord except the Lord, or who is god if not our God?¹³ You are most high, excellent, most powerful, omnipotent, supremely merciful and supremely just, most hidden yet intimately present, infinitely beautiful and infinitely strong, steadfast yet elusive, unchanging yourself though you control the change in all things, never new, never old, renewing all things¹⁴ yet wearing down the proud though they know it not;¹⁵ ever active, ever at rest, gathering while knowing no need, supporting and filling and guarding, creating and nurturing and perfecting, seeking although you lack nothing. You love without frenzy, you are jealous yet secure, you regret without sadness,¹⁶ you grow angry yet remain tranquil, you alter your works but never your plan; you take back what you find although you never lost it; you are never in need yet you rejoice in your gains, never avaricious yet you demand profits.¹⁷ You allow us to pay you more than you demand, and so you become our debtor, yet which of us possesses anything that does not already belong to you? You owe us nothing, yet you pay your debts; you write off our debts to you, yet you lose nothing thereby.

After saying all that, what have we said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What does anyone who speaks of you really say? Yet woe betide those who fail to speak, while the chatterboxes go on saying nothing.

5, 5. Who will grant me to find peace in you? Who will grant me this grace, that you would come into my heart and inebriate it, enabling me to forget the evils that beset me¹⁸ and embrace you, my only good? What are you to me? Have mercy on me, so that I may tell. What indeed am I to you, that you should command me to love you, and grow angry with me if I do not, and threaten me with enormous woes? Is not the failure to love you woe enough in itself? Alas

¹³See Ps 17:32 (18:31).

¹⁴See Wis 7:27.

¹⁵See Jb 9:5.

¹⁶See Gn 6:6–7.

¹⁷See Mt 25:27.

¹⁸See Jer 44:9.

for me! Through your own merciful dealings with me, O Lord my God, tell me what you are to me. Say to my soul, *I am your salvation*.¹⁹ Say it so that I can hear it. My heart is listening, Lord; open the ears of my heart and say to my soul, *I am your salvation*. Let me run toward this voice and seize hold of you. Do not hide your face from me:²⁰ let me die so that I may see it, for not to see it would be death to me indeed.²¹

6. The house of my soul is too small for you to enter: make it more spacious by your coming. It lies in ruins: rebuild it. Some things are to be found there which will offend your gaze; I confess this to be so and know it well. But who will clean my house? To whom but yourself can I cry, *Cleanse me of my hidden sins, O Lord, and for those incurred through others pardon your servant?*²² I believe, and so I will speak²³ You know everything, Lord.²⁴ Have I not laid my own transgressions bare before you to my own condemnation, my God, and have you not forgiven the wickedness of my heart?²⁵ I do not argue my case against you,²⁶ for you are truth itself; nor do I wish to deceive myself, lest my iniquity be caught in its own lies.²⁷ No, I do not argue the case with you, because *if you, Lord, keep the score of our iniquities, then who, Lord, can bear it?*²⁸

STOP ch. 1 go to ch. 2. Infancy

6, 7. Yet allow me to speak, though I am but dust and ashes,²⁹ allow me to speak in your merciful presence, for it is to your mercy that I address myself, not to some man who would mock me. Perhaps you too are laughing at me,³⁰ but still you will turn mercifully toward me,³¹ for what is it that I am trying to say, Lord, except that I do not know whence I came into this life that is but a dying, or rather, this dying state that leads to life? I do not know where I came from. But

the story of my life

¹⁹Ps 34 (35):3.

²⁰See Dt 32:20.

²¹See Ex 33:23.

²²Ps 18 (19):13.

²³Ps 115 (116):10; 2 Cor 4:13.

²⁴See Jn 21:17.

²⁵See Ps 31 (32):5.

²⁶See Jb 9:2-3.

²⁷See Ps 26 (27):12.

²⁸Ps 129 (130):3.

²⁹See Gn 18:27; Jb 42:6.

³⁰See Ps 2:4; 36 (37):13; Wis 4:18.

³¹See Jer 12:15.

this I know, that I was welcomed by the tender care your mercy provided for me, for so I have been told by the parents who gave me life according to the flesh, those parents through whose begetting and bearing you formed me within time, although I do not remember it myself. The comforts of human milk were waiting for me, but my mother and my nurses did not fill their own breasts; rather you gave me an infant's nourishment through them in accordance with your plan, from the riches deeply hidden in creation. You restrained me from craving more than you provided, and inspired in those who nurtured me the will to give me what you were giving them, for their love for me was patterned on your law, and so they wanted to pass on to me the overflowing gift they received from you. It was a bounty for them, and a bounty for me from them; or, rather, not from them but only through them, for in truth all good things are from you, O God. Everything I need for health and salvation flows from my God. This I learned later as you cried the truth aloud to me through all you give me, both within and without. At that time I knew only how to suck and be deliciously comforted, and how to cry when anything hurt my body, but no more.

8. After this I began to smile, at first only in my sleep and then when I was awake. So I have been told, and I believe it on the strength of what we see other babies doing, for I do not remember doing it myself. Little by little I began to notice where I was, and I would try to make my wishes known to those who might satisfy them; but I was frustrated in this, because my desires were inside me, while other people were outside and could by no effort of understanding enter my mind. So I tossed about and screamed, sending signals meant to indicate what I wanted, those few signs that were the best I could manage, though they did not really express my desires. Often I did not get my way, either because people did not understand or because what I demanded might have harmed me, and then I would throw a tantrum because my elders were not subject to me, nor free people willing to be my slaves; so I would take revenge on them by bursting into tears. I have learned that babies behave like this from those I have been able to watch, and they without knowing it have taught me more surely what I was like myself than did my nurses who knew me well.

local picture of babies who this would read

In a living creature such as this
 everything is wonderful and worthy of praise,
 but all these things are gifts from my God.
 I did not endow myself with them,
 but they are good, and together they make me what I am.
 He who made me is good, and he is my good too;
 rejoicing, I thank him for all those good gifts
 which made me what I was, even as a boy.

In this lay my sin,
 that not in him was I seeking pleasures, distinctions and truth,
 but in myself and the rest of his creatures,
 and so I fell headlong into pains, confusions and errors.
 But I give thanks to you, my sweetness, my honor, my confidence;
 to you, my God, I give thanks for your gifts.
 Do you preserve them for me.
 So will you preserve me too,
 and what you have given me will grow and reach perfection,
 and I will be with you; because this too is your gift to me
 —that I exist.

Book II

ADOLESCENCE

Sexual awakening

1, 1. Now I want to call to mind the foul deeds I committed, those sins of the flesh that corrupted my soul, not in order to love them, but to love you, my God. Out of love for loving you I do this, recalling my most wicked ways and thinking over the past with bitterness so that you may grow ever sweeter to me; for you are a sweetness that deceives not, a sweetness blissful and serene. I will try now to give a coherent account of my disintegrated self, for when I turned away from you, the one God, and pursued a multitude of things, I went to pieces. There was a time in adolescence when I was afire to take my fill of hell. I boldly thrust out rank, luxuriant growth in various furtive love affairs; my beauty wasted away and I rotted in your sight, intent on pleasing myself and winning favor in the eyes of men.

2, 2. What was it that delighted me? Only loving and being loved. But there was no proper restraint, as in the union of mind with mind, where a bright boundary regulates friendship. From the mud of my fleshly desires¹ and my erupting puberty belched out murky clouds that obscured and darkened my heart until I could not distinguish the calm light of love from the fog of lust. The two swirled about together and dragged me, young and weak as I was, over the cliffs of my desires, and engulfed me in a whirlpool of sins. Your anger had grown hot at my doings, yet I did not know. I was deafened by that clanking chain of my mortal state which was the punishment for my soul's pride, and I was wandering away from you, yet you let me go my way. I was flung hither and thither, I poured myself out, frothed and floundered in the tumultuous sea of my fornications; and you were silent.² O my joy, how long I took to find you! At that time you kept silence as I continued to wander far from

¹See 1 Jn 2:16.²See Is 42:14.

See also
 disintegrated
 out a way to God
 very thin [25]

God's silence

you and sowed more and more sterile seeds to my own grief, abased by my pride and wearied by my restlessness.

3. Who was there to alleviate my distress? No one took thought to arrange a marriage for me, so that my pursuit of fleeting beauties through most ignoble experiences might be diverted into useful channels. Some bounds might have been set to my pleasures if only the stormy surge of my adolescence had flung me up onto the shore of matrimony. Or again, if I had been unable to find tranquillity in that way, content to use my sexuality to procreate children as your law enjoins,³ O Lord (since you propagate the stock of our mortal race by this means, powerfully using your gentle hand to control the thorns which have no place in your paradise,⁴ for your almighty power is never far from us, even when we are far from you), if, as I say, I could not have found peace in marriage, this at all events is certain, that I ought to have listened more attentively to the voice from your clouds which proclaimed, *Those who marry will have trials in their married life; and I would wish to spare you;*⁵ and again, *It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman;*⁶ and, *An unmarried man is preoccupied with the affairs of God, and with pleasing God; but a married man is preoccupied with the affairs of the world, and with pleasing his wife.*⁷ Yes, I could have listened more attentively to those words, and made myself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven.⁸ In that way I might have waited more contentedly for your embrace.

4. But I was far too impetuous, poor wretch, so I went with the floodtide of my nature and abandoned you. I swept across all your laws,⁹ but I did not escape your chastisements, for what mortal can do that? You were ever present to me, mercifully angry, sprinkling very bitter disappointments over all my unlawful pleasures so that I might seek a pleasure free from all disappointment. If only I could have done that, I would have found nothing but yourself, Lord, nothing but you yourself who use pain to make your will known to

³See Gn 1:28.

⁴See Gn 3:18.

⁵1 Cor 7:28.

⁶1 Cor 7:1.

⁷1 Cor 7:32-33.

⁸See Mt 19:12.

⁹See Lv 10:11.

us,¹⁰ and strike only to heal,¹¹ and even kill us lest we die away from you. Where was I, and how far was I exiled from the joys of your house¹² in that sixteenth year of my bodily age, when the frenzy of lust imposed its rule on me, and I wholeheartedly yielded to it? A lust that was licensed by disgraceful human custom, but illicit before your laws. Yet none of my family made any attempt to avert my ruin by arranging a marriage for me; their only concern was that I should learn to excel in rhetoric and persuasive speech.

A year at home

3, 5. In that same year, my sixteenth, my studies were interrupted and I was brought back from Madaura, a nearby city where I had been lodging for instruction in literature and rhetoric. The reason for this was that my father was saving up to send me farther afield, to Carthage, though it was his shameless ambition that suggested the plan, not his wealth, for he was no more than a fairly obscure town councillor at Thagaste. But to whom am I telling this story? Not to you, my God; rather in your presence I am relating these events to my own kin, the human race, however few of them may chance upon these writings of mine. And why? So that whoever reads them may reflect with me on the depths from which we must cry to you.¹³ What finds a readier hearing with you than a heart that confesses to you, a life lived from faith?¹⁴

At the time I speak of anyone would have heaped praise upon my father, a man prepared to go beyond his means in spending as much money as was needed to send his son away to study, even in a distant city. No such efforts were made on behalf of the children of many other citizens who were far richer; yet all the while this same father of mine was unconcerned about how I would grow up for you, and cared little that I should be chaste, provided I was intellectually cul-

¹⁰See Ps 93 (94):20.

¹¹See Hos 6:2.

¹²See Lk 15:13.

¹³See Ps 129 (130):1.

¹⁴See Hb 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38.

Sex
marriage

God
present in
his
disobedience

custom
allows less
behaviour

tivated. It would be truer to say that I was left of your cultivation, O God, who are the only true and good owner of your field, my heart.¹⁵

6. Owing to the state of family finances in this sixteenth year of my life there was an interval of leisure for me, during which, being free from all schooling, I began to spend time in my parents' company. The thornbushes of my lust shot up higher than my head, and no hand was there to root them out. Least of all my father's; for when at the baths one day he saw me with unquiet adolescence my only covering and noted my ripening sexuality, he began at once to look forward eagerly to grandchildren, and gleefully announced his discovery to my mother. His glee sprang from that intoxication which has blotted you, our creator, out of this world's memory and led it to love the creature instead,¹⁶ as it drinks the unseen wine of its perverse inclination and is dragged down to the depths. In my mother's soul, however, you had already begun to build your temple and prepare for your holy indwelling,¹⁷ whereas my father was still a catechumen, and a recent one at that. She therefore started up in devout fear and trembling, for she was afraid for me even though I was not yet a Christian. She saw the twisted paths I followed, those paths trodden by people who turn their backs to you, not their faces.¹⁸

Adolescent lust

7. Alas for me! Do I dare to say that you were silent, my God, when I was straying from you? Were you really silent to me at that time? Whose, then, were the words spoken to me by my mother, your faithful follower? Were they not your words, the song you were constantly singing into my ears? None of it sank down to my heart, though, to induce me to act on it. She urged me to keep clear of fornication, and especially not to commit adultery with any man's wife. I remember in my inmost heart the intense earnestness with which she cautioned me against this; but these warnings seemed to me mere woman's talk, which I would have blushed to heed. In truth

God speaking through his mother

¹⁵See Mt 13:24-30.

¹⁶See Rom 1:25.

¹⁷See 1 Cor 3:16-17.

¹⁸See Jer 2:27.

they came from you, but I failed to realize that, and assumed that you were silent and she alone was talking. By using her you were not silent to me at all; and when I scorned her I was scorning you—I, her son, the son of your handmaid, I your servant!¹⁹ But I was quite reckless; I rushed on headlong in such blindness that when I heard other youths of my own age bragging about their immoralities I was ashamed to be less depraved than they. The more disgraceful their deeds, the more credit they claimed; and so I too became as lustful for the plaudits as for the lechery itself. What is more to be reviled than vile debauchery? Afraid of being reviled I grew viler and when I had no indecent acts to admit that could put me on a level with these abandoned youths, I pretended to obscenities I had not committed, lest I might be thought less courageous for being more innocent, and be accounted cheaper for being more chaste.

8. With companions like these I roamed the streets of Babylon and wallowed in its filth as though basking amid cinnamon and precious ointments. My invisible enemy trampled on me²⁰ and seduced me in order to fix me still faster in the center of that city, for I was easy enough to seduce. My natural mother had by this time fled from the center of Babylon,²¹ though she still lingered in its suburbs. She warned me to live chastely, but did not extend her care to restraining within the bounds of conjugal love (if it could not be cut right back to the quick) this behavior of mine, of which she had heard from her husband, even though she judged it to be corrupt already and likely to be dangerous in the future. Her reluctance to arrange a marriage for me arose from the fear that if I were encumbered with a wife my hope could be dashed—not hope in you for the world to come, to which she held herself, but my hope of academic success. Both my parents were very keen on my making progress in study: my father, because he thought next to nothing about you and only vain things about me; and my mother, because she regarded the customary course of studies as no hindrance, and even a considerable help, toward my gaining you eventually. So, at least, do I interpret their respective attitudes, as I remember them now as best I can.

you through his mother

except to her

¹⁹See Ps 115 (116):16.

²⁰See Ps 55:2 (56:1).

²¹See Jer 51:6.

Shame pretended love, etc.

parents chose progress in study over chastity

The restraints placed upon my amusements were also slackened more than strict discipline would have approved, with the result that I strayed into various disreputable amours. Throughout these experiences a dark fog cut me off from your bright truth, my God, and my sin grew sleek on my excesses.²²

He robs a pear tree

4, 9. Beyond question, theft is punished by your law, O Lord,²³ and by the law written in human hearts,²⁴ which not even sin itself can erase; for does any thief tolerate being robbed by another thief, even if he is rich and the other is driven by want? I was under no compulsion of need, unless a lack of moral sense can count as need, and a loathing for justice, and a greedy, full-fed love of sin. Yet I wanted to steal, and steal I did. I already had plenty of what I stole, and of much better quality too, and I had no desire to enjoy it when I resolved to steal it. I simply wanted to enjoy the theft for its own sake, and the sin.

Close to our vineyard there was a pear tree laden with fruit. This fruit was not enticing, either in appearance or in flavor. We nasty lads went there to shake down the fruit and carry it off at dead of night, after prolonging our games out of doors until that late hour according to our abominable custom. We took enormous quantities, not to feast on ourselves but perhaps to throw to the pigs; we did eat a few, but that was not our motive: we derived pleasure from the deed simply because it was forbidden.²⁵

Look upon my heart, O God, look upon this heart of mine, on which you took pity in its abysmal depths. Enable my heart to tell you now what it was seeking in this action which made me bad for no reason, in which there was no motive for my malice except malice. The malice was loathsome, and I loved it. I was in love with my own ruin, in love with decay: not with the thing for which I was falling into decay but with decay itself, for I was depraved in soul, and I leapt down from your strong support into destruction, hunger-

loved my decay

²²See Ps 72 (73):7.

²³See Ex 20:15; Dt 5:19.

²⁴See Rom 2:14-15.

²⁵See Lk 15:15-16.

ing not for some advantage to be gained by the foul deed, but for the fulness of it.

Question of motives

attraction to beautiful things

5, 10. The beautiful form of material things attracts our eyes, so we are drawn to gold, silver and the like. We are powerfully influenced by the feel of things agreeable to the touch; and each of our other senses finds some quality that appeals to it individually in the variety of material objects. There is the same appeal in worldly rank, and the possibility it offers of commanding and dominating other people: this too holds its attraction, and often provides an opportunity for settling old scores. We may seek all these things, O Lord, but in seeking them we must not deviate from your law. The life we live here is open to temptation by reason of a certain measure and harmony between its own splendor and all these beautiful things of low degree. Again, the friendship which draws human beings together in a tender bond is sweet to us because out of many minds it forges a unity. Sin gains entrance through these and similar good things when we turn to them with immoderate desire, since they are the lowest kind of goods and we thereby turn away from the better and higher: from you yourself, O Lord our God, and your truth and your law. These lowest goods hold delights for us indeed, but no such delights as does my God, who made all things; for in him the just man finds delight, and for upright souls²⁶ he himself is joy.

Waste them to tempt

11. So then, when people look for the reason why some criminal act has been committed, their account is usually reckoned credible only when it is evident that there may have been greed on the malefactor's part to gain possession of goods belonging to someone else—those goods we have called "lowest"—or fear of losing his own; for these good things truly are beautiful and lovely in their own way even though base and mean in comparison with the higher goods that bring us true happiness. Suppose someone has committed homicide. Why did he do it? Perhaps he was in love with the victim's wife, or coveted his estate, or wanted to steal from him in order to

rankling goods

²⁶See Ps 63:11 (64:10).

since love of lesser goods

support himself, or feared to be robbed of the like himself by the other man, or had been injured and burned for revenge. Is it likely that he would kill another person without any motive, simply because he enjoyed killing? Who could believe that? Admittedly it is reported of a certain frenzied and outrageously cruel man that "he preferred being evil and cruel with no provocation," but a motive for his crimes was nonetheless declared: he wished to ensure, the historian tells us, that "neither hand nor mind should atrophy from inaction." We might further ask, "And what else did he intend?" He meant to use crime for the training of his young conspirators, in order eventually to gain control of the city and win honors, power and riches: thus he would be free from fear of the law and from the difficulties in his circumstances arising from "shortage of money and his guilty record." Even Catiline, then, did not love his criminal acts for their own sake, but only the advantages he had in view when committing them.

6, 12. How does this apply to me, poor wretch? What did I love in you, O my theft, what did I love in you, the nocturnal crime of my sixteenth year? There was nothing beautiful about you, for you were nothing but a theft. Are you really anything at all, for me to be speaking to you like this?

O good God, creator of all things²⁷ and more beautiful than all of them, those pears we stole did have a certain beauty because they were your creation—yours, O God, who are the highest good and the true good for me. Those pears were beautiful, but they were not what my miserable soul loved. I had plenty of better ones, and I plucked them only for the sake of stealing; for once picked I threw them away. I feasted on the sin, nothing else, and that I relished and enjoyed. Even if some morsel of the pears did enter my mouth, it was only the criminal act that lent it savor. So now, Lord my God, when I ask what it was that gave me pleasure in that theft, I find nothing of fair, seductive form at all. I do not mean simply that it lacked the beauty to be found in justice and prudence, or the beauty of the human mind and intelligence, or that of our senses and bodily life, or the beauty inherent in the stars, so lovely in their appointed

²⁷See 2 Mc 1:24.

places, or in the earth and the sea full of young life born there to replace the things that die. No, I mean more: my theft lacked even the sham, shadowy beauty with which even vice allures us.

13. For in vice there lurks (a counterfeit beauty: pride) for instance—even pride apes sublimity, whereas you are the only God, most high above all things. As for ambition, what does it crave but honors and glory, while you are worthy of honor beyond all others, and eternally glorious? The ferocity of powerful men aims to inspire fear; but who is to be feared except the one God? Can anything be snatched from his power or withdrawn from it—when or where or whither or by whom? Flirtatiousness aims to arouse love by its charming wiles, but nothing can hold more charm than your charity, nor could anything be loved to greater profit than your truth, which outshines all else in its luminous beauty. Curiosity poses as pursuit of knowledge, whereas you know everything to a supreme degree. Even ignorance or stupidity masquerades as simplicity and innocence, but nothing that exists is simpler than yourself; and what could be more innocent than you, who leave the wicked to be hounded by their own sins? Sloth pretends to aspire to rest, but what sure rest is there save the Lord? Lush living likes to be taken for contented abundance, but you are the full and inexhaustible store of a sweetness that never grows stale. Extravagance is a bogus generosity, but you are the infinitely wealthy giver of all good things. Avarice strives to amass possessions, but you own everything. Envy is contentious over rank accorded to another, but what ranks higher than you? Anger seeks revenge, but whoever exacts revenge with greater justice than yourself? Timidity dreads any unforeseen or sudden threat to the things it loves, and takes precautions for their safety; but is anything sudden or unforeseen to you? Who can separate what you love from you?²⁸ Where is ultimate security to be found, except with you? Sadness pines at the loss of the good things with which greed took its pleasure, because it wants to be like you, from whom nothing can be taken away.

14. A soul that turns away from you therefore lapses into fornication²⁹ when it seeks apart from you what it can never find in pure

²⁸See Rom 8:35.

²⁹See Ps 72 (73):27.

not yet

nothing new of this crime

nothing new

beauty of great misused

to find fair



pride - counterfeit beauty

example of disordered desire

1197

concupiscentia?

Sadness

↑
root
fornication

a false imitation of God

crippled sort of freedom

23

ultimate of sin pride

and limpid form except by returning to you. All those who wander far away and set themselves up against you are imitating you, but in a perverse way; yet by this very mimicry they proclaim that you are the creator of the whole of nature, and that in consequence there is no place whatever where we can hide from your presence.

With regard to my theft, then: what did I love in it, and in what sense did I imitate my Lord, even if only with vicious perversity? Did the pleasure I sought lie in breaking the law at least in that sneaky way, since I was unable to do so with any show of strength? Was I, in truth a prisoner, trying to simulate a crippled sort of freedom, attempting a shady parody of omnipotence by getting away with something forbidden? How like that servant of yours who fled from his Lord and hid in the shadows! What rottenness, what a misshapen life! Rather a hideous pit of death! To do what was wrong simply because it was wrong—could I have found pleasure in that?

7, 15. How can I repay the Lord³⁰ for my ability to recall these things without fear? Let me love you, Lord, and give thanks to you and confess to your name, because you have forgiven my grave sins and wicked deeds. By your sheer grace and mercy you melted my sins away like ice.³¹ To your grace also do I ascribe whatever sins I did not commit, for what would I not have been capable of, I who could be enamored even of a wanton crime? I acknowledge that you have forgiven me everything, both the sins I willfully committed by following my own will, and those I avoided through your guidance.

Is there anyone who can take stock of his own weakness and still dare to credit his chastity and innocence to his own efforts? And could such a person think to love you less, on the pretext that he has had smaller need of your mercy, that mercy with which you forgive the sins of those who turn back to you? If there is anyone whom you have called, who by responding to your summons has avoided those sins which he finds me remembering and confessing in my own life as he reads this, let him not mock me; for I have been healed by the same doctor who has granted him the grace not to fall ill, or at least to fall ill less seriously. Let such a person therefore love you just as

³⁰See Ps 115 (116):12.

³¹See Sir 3:17.

much, or even more, on seeing that the same physician who rescued me from sinful diseases of such gravity has kept him immune.

8, 16. What fruit did I ever reap from those things which I now blush to remember,³² and especially from that theft in which I found nothing to love save the theft itself, wretch that I was? It was nothing, and by the very act of committing it I became more wretched still. And yet, as I recall my state of mind at the time, I would not have done it alone; I most certainly would not have done it alone. It follows, then, that I also loved the camaraderie with my fellow-thieves. So it is not true to say that I loved nothing other than the theft? Ah, but it is true, because that gang-mentality too was a nothing. What was it in fact? Who can teach me, except the One who illumines my heart³³ and distinguishes between its shadows? Why has this question come into my mind now, to be examined and discussed and considered? If the object of my love had been the pears I stole, and I simply wanted to enjoy them, I could have done it alone; similarly, if the act of committing the sin had sufficed by itself to yield me the pleasure I sought, I would not have further inflamed my itching desire by the stimulation of conspiracy. But since my pleasure did not lie in the pears, it must have been in the crime as committed in the company of others who shared in the sin.

9, 17. What kind of attitude was that? An extremely dishonorable one, certainly; alas for me, that I entertained it! Yet what exactly was it? Who understands his faults?³⁴ The theft gave us a thrill, and we laughed to think we were outwitting people who had no idea what we were doing, and would angrily stop us if they knew. Why could I not have derived the same pleasure from doing it alone? Perhaps because it is not easy to enjoy a joke by oneself? Not easy, to be sure, but it does sometimes happen that people who are entirely alone, with no one else present, are overcome by laughter, if something very funny presents itself to their senses or their thoughts. Possibly . . . but I would not have done that deed alone; in no way would I have done it alone. In your presence I declare it, my God, this is my soul's vivid remembrance. On my own I would not have perpetrated

no fruit nothing

fallen so early

³²See Rom 6:21.

³³See Sir 2:10.

³⁴See Ps 18:13 (19:12).

that theft in which I felt no desire for what I stole, but only for the act of stealing; to do it alone would have aroused no desire whatever in me, nor would I have done it.

What an exceedingly unfriendly form of friendship that was! It was a seduction of the mind hard to understand, which instilled into me a craving to do harm for sport and fun. I was greedy for another person's loss without any desire on my part to gain anything or to settle a score. Let the others only say, "Come on, let's go and do it!" and I am ashamed to hold back from the shameless act.

The prodigal's wanderings begin

10, 18. Who can unravel this most snarled, knotty tangle? It is disgusting, and I do not want to look at it or see it. O justice and innocence, fair and lovely, it is on you that I want to gaze with eyes that see purely and find satiety in never being sated. With you is rest and tranquil life. Whoever enters into you enters the joy of his Lord;³⁵ there he will fear nothing and find his own supreme good in God who is supreme goodness. I slid away from you and wandered away, my God; far from your steadfastness I strayed in adolescence, and I became to myself a land of famine.³⁶

³⁵See Mt 25:21.

³⁶See Lk 15:14.

Book III

STUDENT YEARS AT CARTHAGE

Student life: sex and shows

1. So I arrived at Carthage, where the din of scandalous love affairs raged cauldron-like around me. I was not yet in love, but I was enamored with the idea of love, and so deep within me was my need that I hated myself for the sluggishness of my desires. In love with loving, I was casting about for something to love; the security of a way of life free from pitfalls seemed abhorrent to me, because I was inwardly starved of that food which is yourself, O my God. Yet this inner famine created no pangs of hunger in me. I had no desire for the food that does not perish, not because I had my fill of it, but because the more empty I was, the more I turned from it in revulsion. My soul's health was consequently poor. It was covered with sores and flung itself out of doors, longing to soothe its misery by rubbing against sensible things; yet these were soulless, and so could not be truly loved. Loving and being loved were sweet to me, the more so if I could also enjoy a lover's body; so I polluted the stream of friendship with my filthy desires and clouded its purity with hellish lusts; yet all the while, befouled and disgraced though I was, my boundless vanity made me long to appear elegant and sophisticated. I blundered headlong into the love which I hoped would hold me captive, but in your goodness, O my God, my mercy,¹ you sprinkled bitter gall over my sweet pursuits. I was loved, and I secretly entered into an enjoyable liaison, but I was also trammeling myself with fetters of distress, laying myself open to the iron rods and burning scourges of jealousy and suspicion, of fear, anger and quarrels.²

2. I was held spellbound by theatrical shows full of images that mirrored my own wretched plight and further fueled the fire within me. Why is it that one likes being moved to grief at the sight of sad or tragic events on stage, when one would be unwilling to suffer the

¹See Ps 58:18 (59:17).

²See Gal 5:20.

and because I had as yet found no certain teaching which could convince me beyond doubt that any truthful statements delivered by diviners were due to chance and coincidence, rather than to genuine skill on the part of stargazers.

Death of a friend at Thagaste

4, 7. At this same period, when I first began to teach in the town where I was born, I had a friend who shared my interests and was exceedingly dear to me. He was the same age as myself and, like me, now in the flower of young manhood. As a boy he had grown up with me; we had gone to school together and played together. He was not then such a friend to me as he was to become later, though even at the later time of which I speak our union fell short of true friendship, because friendship is genuine only when you bind fast together people who cleave to you through the charity poured abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.⁹ I did love him very tenderly, though, and similarity of outlook lent warmth to our relationship; for I had lured him from the true faith, which he had held in a thoroughly immature way and without conviction, to the superstitious and baneful fables which my mother deplored in me. Already this man was intellectually astray along with me, and my soul could not bear to be without him. Ah, but you were pursuing close behind us, O God of vengeance¹⁰ who are the fount of all mercy and turn us back to yourself in wondrous ways. You took him from this life after barely a year's friendship, a friendship sweeter to me than any sweetness I had known in all my life.

8. Who can of himself alone extol your deeds, even those you have wrought in him alone? O my God, what was it that you then did for me? How unfathomable the abyss of your judgments!¹¹ As my friend struggled with fever he lay for a long time unconscious and sweating at death's door; and as hope for his recovery dwindled he was baptized without his knowledge. I cared little for this, since I took it for granted that his mind was more likely to retain what he

⁹See Rom 5:5.
¹⁰See Ps 93 (94):1.

¹¹See Rom 11:33.

had received from me; irrespective of any rite performed on his unconscious body. How wrong I was; for he rallied and grew stronger, and immediately, or as soon as I possibly could (which is to say at the first moment that he was fit for it, for I did not leave him, so closely were we dependent on each other), I attempted to chaff him, expecting him to join me in making fun of the baptism he had undergone while entirely absent in mind and unaware of what was happening. But he had already learned that he had received it, and he recoiled from me with a shudder as though I had been his enemy, and with amazing, newfound independence warned me that if I wished to be his friend I had better stop saying such things to him. I stood aghast and troubled, but deferred telling him of my feelings in order to let him get better first, thinking that once he was in normal health again I would be able to do what I liked with him. But he was snatched away from my mad designs, to be kept safe with you for my consolation: a few days later the fever seized him anew and he died. And I was not there.

9. Black grief closed over my heart¹² and wherever I looked I saw only death. My native land was a torment to me and my father's house unbelievable misery. Everything I had shared with my friend turned into hideous anguish without him. My eyes sought him everywhere, but he was missing; I hated all things because they held him not, and could no more say to me, "Look here he comes!" as they had been wont to do in his lifetime when he had been away. I had become a great enigma to myself, and I questioned my soul, demanding why it was sorrowful and why it so disquieted me, but it had no answer. If I bade it, "Trust in God," it rightly disobeyed me, for the man it had held so dear and lost was more real and more lovable than the fantasy in which it was bidden to trust. Weeping alone brought me solace, and took my friend's place as the only comfort of my soul.

5, 10. All this is over now, Lord, and my hurt has been assuaged with time. Let me listen now to you who are truth; bring the ear of my heart close to your mouth, that you may tell me why weeping is a relief to the wretched. Can it be that although you are everywhere

¹²See Lam 5:17.

present you have flung our wretchedness far away from you, abiding unmoved in yourself¹³ while we are tossed to and fro amid human trials? Surely not, for if we could not weep into your very ears, no shred of hope would be left to us. How comes it, then, that such sweet fruit is plucked from life's bitterness, the sweetness of groans, tears, sighs and laments? Does the comfort lie in this, that we hope you will hear? This is certainly true of our prayers, for they presuppose a desire to reach you. But is it true of sorrow for what we have lost, and of the grief that overwhelmed me then? No, for I neither hoped that he would come back to life nor made my tears a plea that he should; I simply mourned and wept; for I was beset with misery and bereft of my joy. Or is it that bitter tears match the weariness we feel over what we once enjoyed, but find attractive no more?

6, 11. But why am I talking thus? This is no time for asking questions, but for confessing to you. I was miserable, and miserable too is everyone whose mind is chained by friendship with mortal things, and is torn apart by their loss, and then becomes aware of the misery that it was in even before it lost them. This was my condition at the time; I wept very bitterly and found repose in the bitterness. Miserable as I was, I held even this miserable life dearer than my friend; for although I might wish to change it, I would have been even less willing to lose it than I was to lose him. I do not even know if I would have been willing to lose it for him, after the manner of Orestes and Pylades, who wanted to die for one another or, failing that, to die together, because for either to live without the other would have been worse than death—or so the story goes, though it may not be true. Some kind of emotion opposed to this had sprung up in me, so that although my weariness with living was intense, so too was my fear of dying. I believe that the more I loved him, the more I hated death, which had taken him from me; I hated it as a hideous enemy, and feared it, and pictured it as ready to devour all human beings, since it had been able to make away with him. Yes, this was my state of mind: I remember it.

Look upon my heart, O my God, look deep within it. See, O my hope, who cleanse me from the uncleanness of such affections, who

¹³See Wis 7:27.

draw my eyes to yourself and pull my feet free from the snare,¹⁴ see that this is indeed what I remember. I was amazed that other mortals went on living when he was dead whom I had loved as though he would never die, and still more amazed that I could go on living myself when he was dead—I, who had been like another self to him. It was well said that a friend is half one's own soul. I felt that my soul and his had been but one soul in two bodies, and I shrank from life with loathing because I could not bear to be only half alive; and perhaps I was so afraid of death because I did not want the whole of him to die, whom I had loved so dearly.

7, 12. Woe to the madness which thinks to cherish human beings as though more than human! How foolish the human heart that anguishes without restraint over human ills, as I did then! Feverishly I thrashed about, sighed, wept and was troubled, and there was no repose for me, nor any counsel. Within me I was carrying a tattered, bleeding soul that did not want me to carry it, yet I could find no place to lay it down. Not in pleasant countryside did it find rest, nor in shows and songs, nor in sweet-scented gardens, nor in elaborate feasts, nor in the pleasures of couch or bed, nor even in books and incantations. All things lured at me, even daylight itself, and everything that was not what he was seemed to me offensive and hateful, except for mourning and tears, in which alone I found some slight relief. Whenever my soul was drawn away from this, it burdened me with a great load of misery. I should have lifted it up to you, Lord,¹⁵ to be healed, but I was neither willing nor able to do so, especially because when I thought about you you did not seem to be anything solid or firm. For what I thought of was not you at all; an empty fantasy and my own error were my god. If I tried to lodge my soul in that, hoping that it might rest there, it would slip through that insubstantial thing and fall back again on me, who had remained to myself an unhappy place where I could not live, but from which I could not escape. Whither could my heart flee to escape itself? Where could I go and leave myself behind? Was there any place of refuge where I would not be followed by my own self?

could
not
find
rest

¹⁴See Ps 24 (25):15.

¹⁵See Ps 24 (25):1.

Yet flee I did from my native land, for my eyes were less inclined to look for him where they had not been wont to see him before. So I left Thagaste and came to Carthage.

Consolation in other friends at Carthage

8, 13. Time does not stand still, nor are the rolling seasons useless to us, for they work wonders in our minds. They came and went from day to day, and by their coming and going implanted in me other hopes and other memories. Little by little they set me up again and turned me toward things that had earlier delighted me, and before these my sorrow began to give ground. Yet its place was taken, not indeed by fresh sorrows, but by the seeds of fresh sorrows; for how had that sorrow been able so easily to pierce my inmost being, if not because I had poured out my soul into the sand by loving a man doomed to death as though he were never to die? What restored and re-created me above all was the consolation of other friends, in whose company I loved what I was loving as a substitute for you. This was a gross fable and a long-sustained lie, and as our minds itched to listen they were corrupted by its adulterous excitation, but the fable did not die for me when any of my friends died.

There were other joys to be found in their company which still more powerfully captivated my mind—the charms of talking and laughing together and kindly giving way to each other's wishes, reading elegantly written books together, sharing jokes and delighting to honor one another, disagreeing occasionally but without rancor, as a person might disagree with himself, and lending piquancy by that rare disagreement to our much more frequent accord. We would teach and learn from each other, sadly missing any who were absent and blithely welcoming them when they returned. Such signs of friendship sprang from the hearts of friends who loved and knew their love returned, signs to be read in smiles, words, glances and a thousand gracious gestures. So were sparks kindled and our mind were fused inseparably, out of many becoming one.

9, 14. This is what we esteem in our friends, and so highly do we esteem it that our conscience feels guilt if we fail to love someone who responds to us with love, or do not return the love of one who

friends
love as
substitute

loss of absence among friends not with God

offers love to us, and this without seeking any bodily gratification from the other save signs of his goodwill. From this springs our grief if someone dies, from this come the darkness of sorrow and the heart drenched with tears because sweetness has turned to bitterness, so that as the dying lose their life, life becomes no better than death for those who live on. Blessed is he who loves you, and loves his friend in you and his enemy for your sake.¹⁶ He alone loses no one dear to him, to whom all are dear in the One who is never lost. And who is this but our God, the God who made heaven and earth and fills them, because it was by filling them that he made them? No one loses you unless he tries to get rid of you, and if he does try to do that, where can he go, whither does he flee,¹⁷ but from you in your tranquillity to you in your anger? Does he not encounter your law everywhere, in his own punishment? Your law is truth, as you yourself are truth.¹⁸

Transience of created things

10, 15. Turn us toward yourself, O God of Hosts, show us your face and we shall be saved;¹⁹ for wheresoever a human soul turns, it can but cling to what brings sorrow unless it turns to you, cling though it may to beautiful things outside you and outside itself. Yet were these beautiful things not from you, none of them would be at all. They arise and sink; in their rising they begin to exist and grow toward their perfection, but once perfect they grow old and perish; or, if not all reach old age, yet certainly all perish. So then, even as they arise and stretch out toward existence, the more quickly they grow and strive to be, the more swiftly they are hastening toward extinction. This is the law of their nature. You have endowed them so richly because they belong to a society of things that do not all exist at once, but in their passing away and succession together form a whole, of which the several creatures are parts. So is it with our speaking as it proceeds by audible signs: it will not be a whole utterance unless one

¹⁶See Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27.

¹⁷See Ps 138 (139:7).

¹⁸See Ps 118 (119):142; Jn 14:6.

¹⁹See Ps 79:8 (80:7).

word dies away after making its syllables heard, and gives place to another.

Let my soul use these things to praise you,
O God, creator of them all,
but let it not be glued fast to them by sensual love,
for they are going whither they were always destined to go,
toward extinction;
and they rend my soul with death-dealing desires,
for it too longs to be, and loves to rest in what it loves.
But in them it finds no place to rest,
because they do not stand firm;
they are transient, and who can follow them with the senses of the body?
Or who can seize them, even near at hand?
Tardy is carnal perception, because it is carnal;
such is the law of its nature.
Sufficient it is for another purpose, for which it was made,
but insufficient to catch the fleeting things
that rush past from their appointed beginning
to their appointed end.
In your Word, through whom they are created,
they hear your command,
"From here begin, and thus far you shall go."

11, 16. Be not vain, my soul, and take care that the ear of your heart be not deafened by the din of your vanity. You too must listen to the selfsame Word who calls you back, and there find a place of imperturbable quiet, where love is never forsaken unless it chooses to forsake. See, those things go their way that others may succeed them, and that a whole may exist comprised of all its parts, though a lowly whole indeed. "But I," says the Word of God, "shall I depart to any place?" Fix your dwelling there,²⁰ my soul, lay up there for safe keeping whatever you have thence received, if only because you are weary of deceptions. Entrust to Truth whatever of truth is in you, and

²⁰See Jn 14:23.

where love is never forsaken unless it chooses to forsake
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you will lose nothing; your rotten flesh will flower anew,²¹ all your diseases will be healed,²² all your labile elements will be restored and bound fast to you; they will not drag you with them in their own collapse, but will stand firm with you and abide, binding you to the ever-stable, abiding God.²³

17. Why follow your flesh, perverted soul? Rather let it follow you, once you are converted. Whatever you experience through it is partial, and you do not know the whole, of which these experiences are but a part, although they give you pleasure. Were your carnal perception able to grasp the whole, were it not, for your punishment, confined to its due part of the whole, you would long for whatever exists only in the present to pass away, so that you might find greater joy in the totality. When with this same carnal perception you listen to human speech, you do not want to halt the succession of syllables: you want them to fly on their way and make room for others, so that you may hear the whole. So is it always with the constituent elements of a simple object, constituents which do not all exist simultaneously: in their entirety they give us greater pleasure, provided we can perceive them all together, than they do separately. But better still, better by far, is he who made all things. He is our God, who does not pass away, for there is nothing else to supplant him.

12, 18. If sensuous beauty delights you, praise God for the beauty of corporeal things, and channel the love you feel for them onto their Maker, lest the things that please you lead you to displease him. If kinship with other souls appeals to you, let them be loved in God, because they too are changeable and gain stability only when fixed in him; otherwise they would go their way and be lost. Let them be loved in him, and carry off to God as many of them as possible with you, and say to them:

Let us love him, for he made these things and he is not far off,²⁴ for he did not make them and then go away: they are from him but

re-attach to God.

²¹See Ps 27 (28):7.

²²See Mt 4:23; Ps 102 (103):3.

²³See Ps 101:13 (102:12); Heb 1:11;

1 Pt 1:23.

²⁴See Ps 99 (100):3; Acts 17:27.

Start here

Read to end of

SAINT AUGUSTINE: THE CONFESSIONS

Chapter

BOOK V

when Church is wrong

and numbers the stars and weighs the elements, yet leaves you out of his reckoning, you who have disposed all things according to measure and number and weight.²²

Manichean assertions about natural phenomena are astray

5, 8. Who ever thought of asking some fellow called Mani to write on these subjects? People could perfectly well have learned true piety without any such expertise. Your advice to us is, *Reverence for God, that is true wisdom.*²³ Obviously Mani might have been thoroughly conversant with scientific truths, even if a stranger to piety. In fact, however, he was ignorant of them, but still had the effrontery to teach them, and from this it emerges that he knew nothing about piety either; for to profess these theories about the world is a mark of vanity, whereas piety is proved by confession to you. It was providential that this man talked so much about scientific subjects, and got it wrong, because this gave people who had truly studied them the chance to convict him of error; and then by implication his insight into other, more recondite matters could be clearly assessed. Mani was content with no modest evaluation: he tried to persuade his followers that the Holy Spirit, who comforts your faithful people and enriches them with his gifts, was with full authority present in him personally. It followed, therefore, that when he was caught out in untrue statements about the sky and the stars, or the changes in sun or moon, his presumption was plainly revealed as sacrilegious, because although these matters are not directly relevant to religious doctrine, he was not simply discoursing on things of which he was ignorant, but even, in his insane, pretentious vanity, passing off his erroneous opinions as those of a divine person—himself, no less.

9. When I hear one or other of my fellow-Christians expressing a mistaken opinion arising from his ignorance in these fields, I regard with tolerance the person who entertains the notion. As long as he does not believe anything unseemly about you, O Lord, creator of all things, I do not see that it does him any harm if he chances to be ignorant of the position or characteristics of a material creature. It

²²See Wis 11:21.

²³Jb 28:28.

does harm him, however, if he thinks his view forms an essential part of our doctrine and belief, and presumes to go on obstinately making assertions about what he does not know. Yet when this kind of weakness occurs while faith is in its cradle, our mother, charity, bears with it, looking forward to the day when newly created humanity will grow to the stature of perfect manhood, and no longer be tossed about by every gust of teaching.²⁴

The case was quite different with a man who set himself up as a teacher and writer, and as the leader and principal guide of those to whom he propounded his views, and this so persuasively that his disciples thought they were following no ordinary man but your Holy Spirit. If ever such a man were proved to have spoken untruly, could anyone doubt that he must have been grossly deranged, and that his ideas were abhorrent, and to be rejected outright?

I, however, had not yet clearly determined whether variations in the length of day and night, eclipses of the moon and the sun, and similar phenomena of which I had read in other books could be explained equally well by his account of them. If by chance they could, it would still be possible for me to keep open the question of whether his version or theirs more plausibly represented things as they really were, and thus to prefer his authority as a guide to my faith, on the grounds of his alleged holiness.

Augustine is disappointed in Faustus

6, 10. All through that period of about nine years, during which I was spiritually adrift as a hearer among the Manichees, I had been awaiting the arrival of this Faustus with an expectancy that had been at full stretch too long. Whenever I had been in contact with others of the sect, and their replies to the questions I raised on these topics failed to satisfy me, they would put me off with promises about him. Once he had arrived, they assured me, and I had an opportunity to discuss things with him, these points, together with any more serious problems I might raise, would quite easily be sorted out and resolved. When he came, then, he did indeed impress me as a man of

²⁴See Eph 4:24; 4:13-14.

pleasant and smooth speech, who chattered on the usual themes much more beguilingly than the rest. A man adept at serving finer wines, then; but what was that to me in my thirst? My ears were sated with such offerings already. The content did not seem better to me for being better presented, nor true because skillfully expressed, nor the man wise of soul because he had a handsome face and a graceful turn of speech. Those who had held out promises to me were not good judges; to them he seemed wise and prudent merely because they enjoyed the way he talked. But I realized that there were people of a different stamp who doubted even the possibility of truth, and were unwilling to trust anything conveyed in elegant and fluent style.

For some time, though, you had been teaching me in wondrous, hidden ways, my God (and I believe what you have taught me because it is true; there is no other teacher of truth except you, though teachers aplenty have made a name for themselves in many a place); so I had already learned under your tuition that nothing should be regarded as true because it is eloquently stated, nor false because the words sound clumsy. On the other hand, it is not true for being expressed in uncouth language either, nor false because couched in splendid words. I had come to understand that just as wholesome and rubbishy food may both be served equally well in sophisticated dishes or in others of rustic quality, so too can wisdom and foolishness be proffered in language elegant or plain.

11. After waiting so long and so eagerly for this man, I was certainly delighted with his lively and spirited style in debate, and by his apt choice of words to clothe his thought, words that came to him readily. Yes, I was delighted, and along with others I praised and extolled him; indeed, I was in the forefront of those who did so. But I was annoyed that amid the crowd who went to hear him I was unable to catch his attention or share my anxious questionings with him in intimate conversation and the give-and-take of discussion. If ever I did succeed in gaining a hearing with him in the company of intimate friends and at a time which was not unsuitable for an exchange of ideas, and I put to him some of the problems that preoccupied me, then, before even coming to anything deeper, what I found was a man ill-educated in the liberal arts, apart from gram-

mar, and even in that schooled only to an average level. He had read a few of Cicero's speeches and one or two books by Seneca, and some volumes fairly well written in Latin for his own sect, and because in addition to this he was accustomed to preach daily, he had acquired a fair command of language, which was rendered the more glib and seductive by his skillful management of what ability he had and a certain natural charm.

Is my recollection not accurate, Lord God, judge of my conscience? My heart and my memory of these things lie open before you,²⁵ who were leading me by your hidden, secret providence, and were already bringing my shameful errors round in front of my face,²⁶ that I might see and hate them.

7, 12. Once it had become sufficiently clear to me that he was poorly informed about the very disciplines in which I had believed him to excel, I began to give up hope that he could elucidate and clear up for me the problems with which I was concerned. To be sure, he could have been ignorant about these and still have had a grasp of religious truth, but only on condition of not being a Manichee. Their books are full of interminable myths concerning sky, stars, sun and moon, and it had been my earnest wish that by comparing these with the numerical calculations I had read elsewhere he would demonstrate to me that the phenomena in question could be more plausibly explained by the account given in Mani's books, or at least that an equally valid explanation could be found there; but now I no longer deemed him capable of explaining these things to me with any precision.

I must say, however, that when I raised these points for consideration and discussion he refused courteously enough, reluctant to risk taking on that burden; for he knew that he did not know about these matters, and was not ashamed to admit it. He was not one of the alkative kind, of whom I had suffered many, who tried to teach me out said nothing. His heart was, if not right with you,²⁷ yet not without discretion. He was not altogether unaware of his own lack of awareness and was unwilling to enter rashly into argument that

²⁵See Num 10:9.

²⁶See Ps 49 (50):21; and above IV, 16, 30.

²⁷See Ps 77 (78):37; Acts 8:21.

leave him cornered, with no way out and no easy means of retracting. This attitude endeared him to me all the more, for the restraint of a mind that admits its limitations is more beautiful than the beautiful things about which I desired to learn. I found him consistent in this approach to all the more difficult and subtle questions.

13. The keen attention I had directed toward Mani's writings was therefore rebuffed, for I felt more hopeless than ever in respect of their other teachers now that this man, for all his reputation, had turned out to be so incompetent in many of the subjects that mattered to me. I began to spend much time in his company on account of his ardent enthusiasm for the literature that I, as a master of rhetoric, was teaching to the young men of Carthage, and thereafter I fell into the habit of reading with him any works which he had heard of and wished to study, or which were, in my judgment, suited to his ability. Apart from this, all the plans I had formed for advancement in the sect lapsed into oblivion now that I had come to know this man: not that I severed my connection with it entirely, but since I had found nothing better than this sect into which I had more or less blundered, I resolved to be content with it for the time being, unless some preferable option presented itself.

Thus it came about that this Faustus, who was a deathtrap for many, unwittingly and without intending it began to spring the trap in which I was caught, for thanks to your hidden providence, O my God, your hands did not let go of my soul. Through my mother's tears the sacrifice of her heart's blood was being offered to you day after day, night after night, for my welfare; and you dealt with me in wondrous ways. You, my God, you it was who dealt so with me: for our steps are directed by the Lord, and our way is of his choosing.²⁸ What other provision is there for our salvation, but your hand that remakes what you have made?

Indiscipline among his students prompts move to Rome

8, 14. You dealt with me in such a way that I was persuaded to move to Rome, to teach there instead what I had been teaching at

²⁸Ps 36 (37):23.

Student

Carthage. I must not omit to confess to you the reasons why I was so persuaded, because in them your deep, secret providence was at work and your ever-present mercy, and these are to be pondered and proclaimed. I did not want to go to Rome because my friends promised me that there I would command higher fees and enjoy greater prestige—though these arguments were not without force for me; the principal and almost the sole reason was that I heard that young men there study more quietly and are controlled by a more systematic regime of strict discipline to prevent them from rushing pell-mell and at random into the school of a teacher with whom they are not enrolled; in fact they are not admitted at all except by his permission. At Carthage things are very different: the unbridled licentiousness of the students is disgusting. Looking almost like madmen they burst in recklessly and disrupt the discipline each master has established to ensure that his pupils make progress. With boorishness that defies belief they commit many acts of violence which would attract legal penalties if custom did not seem to plead in their defense; yet this in itself proves that the perpetrators are the more to be pitied, inasmuch as they do with apparent legality what will never be permitted by your eternal law, and think they are acting so with impunity, whereas the very blindness that dictates their behavior is itself their punishment, and they suffer far worse damage themselves than they inflict on others.

better discipline!

Accordingly while teaching these youths I was being forced to endure those very forms of misconduct I had been chary of adopting myself in my student days; and I decided to depart for a place where, by all accounts, such things did not happen.

But in truth it was you, my hope and my inheritance in the country of the living,²⁹ who for my soul's salvation prompted me to change my country, and to this end you provided both the goads at Carthage that dislodged me from there and the allurements at Rome that attracted me; and this you did through the lovers of a life that is no more than death, who on the one hand behaved insanely and on the other held out to me vain promises. To bring my steps back to the straight path you secretly made use of both their perversity and

²⁹Ps 141:6 (142:5).

mine; for those who disturbed my tranquillity were blinded by disgusting frenzy, while those who invited me elsewhere were wise only in the things of this earthly country,³⁰ while I, for my part, loathed real misery in the one place and craved spurious happiness in the other.

Monica's opposition; Augustine departs by stealth

15. You knew all along, O God, the real reason why I left to seek a different country, but you did not reveal it either to me or to my mother, who bitterly bewailed my departure and followed me to the seashore. She held on to me with all her strength, attempting either to take me back home with her or to come with me, but I deceived her, pretending that I did not want to take leave of a friend until a favorable wind should arise and enable him to set sail. I lied to my mother, my incomparable mother! But I went free, because in your mercy you forgave me. Full of detestable filth as I was, you kept me safe from the waters of the sea to bring me to the water of your grace; once I was washed in that, the rivers of tears that flowed from my mother's eyes would be dried up, those tears with which day by day she bedewed the ground wherever she prayed to you for me.

At the time, however, she refused to go home, and it was only with difficulty that I persuaded her to spend the night in a place very near our ship, a memorial chapel to Blessed Cyprian. That same night I left by stealth; she did not, but remained behind praying and weeping. And what was she begging of you, my God, with such abundant tears? Surely, that you would not allow me to sail away. But in your deep wisdom you acted in her truest interests: you listened to the real nub of her longing and took no heed of what she was asking at this particular moment, for you meant to make me into what she was asking for all the time. So the wind blew for us and filled our sails, and the shore dropped away from our sight as she stood there at morning light mad with grief, filling your ears with complaints and groans.

You took no heed, for you were snatching me away, using my

³⁰See Phil 3:18-19.

lusts to put an end to them and chastising her too-carnal desire with the scourge of sorrow. Like all mothers, though far more than most, she loved to have me with her, and she did not know how much joy you were to create for her through my absence. She did not know, and so she wept and wailed, and these cries of pain revealed what there was left of Eve in her, as in anguish she sought the son whom in anguish she had brought to birth.³¹ Yet when she had finished blaming my deception and cruelty, she resumed her entreaties for me, and returned to her accustomed haunts, while I went to Rome.

Illness in Rome; Manichean contacts

9, 16. For me too a scourge was waiting there, in the guise of a bodily illness that brought me to death's door loaded with all the sins I had committed against you, against myself and against other people, evil deeds many and grievous over and above the original sin that binds all of us who die in Adam.³² For no single one of them had you pardoned me in Christ: he had not broken down the barrier of enmity³³. I had piled up against you by my sins, for how could the crucifixion of a phantom do that for me? And that was all I thought he was. The more illusory for me was his death in the flesh, the more real was the death of my soul. But in truth his bodily death was real; it was my unbelieving soul that was living on illusion. My fever worsened. I was on my way to perdition; for where should I have gone, if I had departed at this time? Inevitably to the fire and torments³⁴ my deeds deserved, according to your just ordinance.

Meanwhile my mother, who knew nothing of this, persevered in praying for me; she was far away, but you are present everywhere, so you heard her in that land where she was, and took pity on me where I was. I recovered my bodily health, though I remained sick in my sacrilegious heart. Even in that dire peril I had no desire for your baptism; better had been my state in boyhood when I begged for it from my loving mother, as I have recalled and confessed already. But I had meanwhile grown up into my disgraceful condi-

³¹See Gn 3:16.

³²See 1 Cor 15:22.

³³See Eph 2:14-16.

³⁴See Mt 25:41.

some unknown persons bent on interpolating the Christian faith with elements of the Jewish law; but they produced no incorrupt exemplars themselves.

But most of all it was those massive substances that weighed me down as I thought in terms of bodies; it was as though they pinned me fast and choked me as under their weight I gasped for the pure and unpolluted air of your truth, but found myself unable to breathe it.

Augustine teaches in Rome

12, 22. I now set myself to work hard at teaching rhetoric in Rome, the task for which I had come. My first move was to gather students together at my house, and I began to make a name for myself among them, and more widely through them. But what did I then discover, but that abuses prevailed in Rome which I had not been obliged to contend with in Africa? It was obviously true that acts of vandalism by young hooligans did not occur there, but, I was told, "A crowd of these young men conspire together, and in order to avoid paying their fees to their teacher suddenly leave him for another. They betray their good faith, and because they hold wealth so dear they account justice cheap." My heart was filled with hatred for these youths, but it fell short of perfect hatred,⁵⁰ for I probably hated what I might suffer at their hands more than the crimes they might commit against anyone else. Still, people of this type are depraved and break faith with you⁵¹ by setting their hearts on the fleeting baubles of this passing life and the filthy lucre that sullies the hand that grasps it.⁵² They embrace an elusive world while despising you who abide for ever, you who call them back again and forgive the wanton human soul that returns to you. Today I hate such people for being depraved and twisted, but I will love them insofar as they may be corrected, and may come to prefer the education to the money, and prefer even to the education you yourself, O God, who are truth and overflowing wealth of goodness that deceives not, and pure, inviolate peace.

⁵⁰Ps 138 (139):22.

⁵²See Ti 1:7; 1 Pt 5:2.

⁵¹See Ps 72 (73):27.

But at that time, when harm from these bad students threatened me, my desire to avoid it for my own sake was stronger than any desire that they should become good for yours.

He wins a teaching post in Milan

13, 23. A message had been sent from Milan to Rome, addressed to the prefect of the city, asking for a master of rhetoric. A pass had also been issued, authorizing the person chosen to use the official post-horses. Against the background of unsatisfactory student behavior I therefore canvassed support among citizens drunk on Manichean nonsense, in the hope that after prescribing a subject for a trial discourse the prefect Symmachus would recommend and dispatch me. My real reason for going was to get away from the Manichees, though this was not apparent either to them or to me at the time.

He arrives in Milan and meets Ambrose

So I came to Milan and to Bishop Ambrose, who was known throughout the world as one of the best of men. He was a devout worshiper of you, Lord, and at that time his energetic preaching provided your people with choicest wheat and the joy of oil and the sober intoxication of wine. Unknowingly I was led by you to him, so that through him I might be led, knowingly, to you.

This man of God welcomed me with fatherly kindness and showed the charitable concern for my pilgrimage that befitted a bishop. I began to feel affection for him, not at first as a teacher of truth, for that I had given up hope of finding in your Church, but simply as a man who was kind to me. With professional interest I listened to him conducting disputes before the people, but my intention was not the right one: I was assessing his eloquence to see whether it matched its reputation. I wished to ascertain whether the readiness of speech with which rumor credited him was really there, or something more, or less. I hung keenly upon his words, but cared little for their content, and indeed despised it, as I stood there delighting in the sweetness of his discourse. Though more learned than that of Faustus it was less lighthearted and beguiling; but such

Begin here
intellectually respectable

how he said it

learning to read
Agrippa

criticism concerns the style only, for with regard to the content there was no comparison. While Faustus would wander off into Manichean whimsy, this man was teaching about salvation in a thoroughly salutary way. But salvation is far from sinners,⁵³ and a sinner I was at that time. Yet little by little, without knowing it, I was drawing near.

14, 24. I was taking no trouble to learn from what Ambrose was saying, but interested only in listening to how he said it, for that futile concern had remained with me, despairing as I did that any way to you could be open to humankind. Nonetheless as his words, which I enjoyed, penetrated my mind, the substance, which I overlooked, seeped in with them, for I could not separate the two. As I opened my heart to appreciate how skillfully he spoke, the recognition that he was speaking the truth crept in at the same time, though only by slow degrees. At first the case he was making began to seem defensible to me, and I realized that the Catholic faith, in support of which I had believed nothing could be advanced against Manichean opponents, was in fact intellectually respectable. This realization was particularly keen when once, and again, and indeed frequently, I heard some difficult passage of the Old Testament explained figuratively; such passages had been death to me because I was taking them literally.⁵⁴ As I listened to many such scriptural texts being interpreted in a spiritual sense I confronted my own attitude, or at least that despair which had led me to believe that no resistance whatever could be offered to people who loathed and derided the law and the prophets. However, I did not yet consider the Catholic way the one to follow simply because it too could have its learned proponents, men who were capable of refuting objections with ample argument and good sense; nor did I yet consider the Manicheanism I professed was to be condemned because I had observed that the party of the defense could make out an equally good case. The Catholic Church appeared to me unconquered, but not so clearly as to appear the conqueror.

25. I then expended much mental effort on trying to discover if I could in any way convict the Manichees of falsehood by some definite proofs. If only I had been capable of envisaging a spiritual sub-

⁵³See Ps 118 (119):155.

⁵⁴See 2 Cor 3:6.

stance, all their elaborate constructions would have fallen to pieces at once and been thrown out of my mind; but this I could not do. All the same, as I gave more and more thought to the matter and made comparisons, I judged that many philosophers had held far more probable views on this physical world and on whatever in nature comes within reach of our senses. Accordingly I adopted what is popularly thought to be the Academic position, doubting everything and wavering: I decided that I ought to leave the Manichees, since at this period of uncertainty it was not right for me to continue as a member of a sect to which I judged some philosophers superior; but I flatly refused to entrust the cure of my soul's sickness⁵⁵ to philosophers who were strangers to the saving name of Christ. I resolved therefore to live as a catechumen in the Catholic Church, which was what my parents had wished for me, until some kind of certainty dawned by which I might direct my steps aright.

still attracted to name of Christ

agnostic

⁵⁵Mt 9:35; Lk 9:1.

then distribute; but she would then set out no more than one small cup, mixed to suit her abstemious palate, and from that she would only sip for courtesy's sake. If it happened that there were many shrines of the dead to be honored in this manner she would carry round this same single cup and set it forth in each place. She thus served to her fellow-worshippers extremely sparing allowances of wine which was not only heavily diluted but by this time no more than lukewarm. What she sought to promote at these gatherings was piety, not intemperance.

Once she had ascertained, however, that Ambrose, illustrious preacher and exemplar of piety as he was, had forbidden the celebration of these rites even by those who conducted them with restraint, lest any opportunity might be given to drunkards to indulge in excess, and also because the custom resembled the cult of ancestors and so was close kin to the superstitious practices of the pagans, she most willingly gave it up. She had now seen the wisdom of bringing to the martyrs' shrines not a basket full of the fruits of the earth, but a heart full of more purified offerings, her prayers. In consequence she was now able to give alms to the needy, and it was also possible for the sacrament of the Lord's Body to be celebrated at these shrines—and fittingly, since it was in imitation of his passion that the martyrs offered themselves in sacrifice and were crowned.

All the same, O Lord my God—and in your presence I speak truly from my heart on this matter—it seems to me unlikely that my mother would have yielded easily over the abolition of this custom had it been forbidden by anyone other than Ambrose, whom she highly revered. It was above all for the part he played in my salvation that she esteemed him; and he for his part held her in like esteem for her deeply religious way of life. Her spiritual fervor¹⁰ prompted her to assiduous good works¹¹ and brought her constantly to church, and accordingly when Ambrose saw me he would often burst out in praise of her, telling me how lucky I was to have such a mother. Little did he know what a son she had: I was full of doubts about all these things and scarcely believed it possible to find the way of life.

¹⁰See Rom 12:11.

¹¹See 1 Tm 5:10; 6:18.

Ambrose
provided
Mother



Bishop Ambrose

Start here,
read to end
of chapter

33. Not yet had I begun to pour forth my groans to you in prayer, begging you to help me; rather was my mind intent on searching and restlessly eager for argument. Now I regarded Ambrose as a fortunate man as far as worldly standing went, since he enjoyed the respect of powerful people; it was only his celibacy which seemed to me a burdensome undertaking. I had not begun to guess, still less experience in my own case, what hope he bore within him, or what a struggle he waged against the temptations to which his eminent position exposed him, or the encouragement he received in times of difficulty, or what exquisite delights he savored in his secret mouth, the mouth of his heart, as he chewed the bread of your word.

Nor was he aware of my spiritual turmoil or the perilous pit before my feet.¹² There were questions I wanted to put to him, but I was unable to do so as fully as I wished, because the crowds of people who came to him on business impeded me, allowing me little opportunity either to talk or to listen to him. He was habitually available to serve them in their needs, and in the very scant time that he was not with them he would be refreshing either his body with necessary food or his mind with reading. When he read his eyes would travel across the pages and his mind would explore the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent. We would sometimes be present, for he did not forbid anyone access, nor was it customary for anyone to be announced; and on these occasions we watched him reading silently. It was never otherwise, and so we too would sit for a long time in silence, for who would have the heart to interrupt a man so engrossed? Then we would steal away, guessing that in the brief time he had seized for the refreshment of his mind he was resting from the din of other people's affairs and reluctant to be called away to other business. We thought too that he might be apprehensive that if he read aloud, and any closely attentive listener were doubtful on any point, or the author he was reading used any obscure expressions, he would have to stop and explain various difficult problems

¹²See Mt 15:14.

hope
(P)
silent
reading

that might arise, and after spending time on this be unable to read as much of the book as he wished. Another and perhaps more cogent reason for his habit of reading silently was his need to conserve his voice, which was very prone to hoarseness. But whatever his reason, that man undoubtedly had a good one.

4. This meant, however, that no opportunity at all was given me to find out what I longed to know from your holy oracle, Ambrose's heart. At most, I could only put a point to him briefly, whereas my inner turmoil was at such a feverish pitch that I needed to find him completely at leisure if I were to pour it all out, and I never did so find him. Nonetheless I listened to him *straightforwardly expounding the word of truth*¹³ to the people every Sunday, and as I listened I became more and more convinced that it was possible to unravel all those cunning knots of calumny in which the sacred books had been entangled by tricksters who had deceived me and others. I came to realize that your spiritual children, whom you had brought to a new birth by grace from their mother, the Catholic Church, did not in fact understand the truth of your creating human beings in your image¹⁴ in so crude a way that they believed you to be determined by the form of a human body. Although I had not even a faint or shadowy notion¹⁵ of what a spiritual substance could be like, I was filled with joy, albeit a shamefaced joy, at the discovery that what I had barked against for so many years was not the Catholic faith but the figments of carnal imagination. I had been all the more foolhardy and impious in my readiness to rant and denounce where I ought to have inquired and sought to learn.

O God, most high, most deep, and yet nearer than all else, most hidden yet intimately present, you are not framed of greater and lesser limbs; you are everywhere, whole and entire in every place, but confined to none. In no sense is our bodily form to be attributed to you, yet you have made us in your own image, and lo! here we are, from head to foot set in our place!

¹³2 Tm 2:15.

¹⁴See Gn 1:26-27; 9:6; Sir 17:1.

¹⁵See 1 Cor 13:12.

Image not human body

Image of God

future experience of his, which by now he scarcely remembered and could therefore easily disdain with no trouble at all, and the delights of my habitual way of life. If only the honorable name of matrimony were conferred upon these pleasures, I told him, he would have no right to be astonished that I felt unable to despise the way I lived. He replied that he was most interested to know what this element was, without which my life, which to him appeared so attractive, would be to me a punishment. His mind, free from that fetter, was amazed at my servitude, and through amazement was drawn toward a hankering to experience it. He might have found his way into the same experience and perhaps have fallen from there into the very servitude which had provoked his amazement, for what he was bent upon was a pact with death,⁵⁴ and anyone who falls in love with danger will fall into it.⁵⁵ Neither of us considered, except feebly, what the glory of wedlock could be in terms of guiding the course of a marriage and bringing up children. It was my habitual attempt to sate an insatiable concupiscence that for the most part savagely tormented me and held me captive, while for him it was wonder that dragged him along toward captivity.

Such was our condition until you, O Most High, who forsake not our clay,⁵⁶ mercifully came to aid our misery in marvelous, hidden ways.

Ⓟ start here. Read to end of chapter

Projected marriage

13, 23. Insistent pressure was on me to marry a wife. Already I was asking for it myself, and a marriage was being arranged for me, thanks especially to my mother's efforts. She expected to see me washed in the saving waters of baptism after marriage, and she rejoiced to see me being daily shaped toward this end, observing that her prayers were beginning to be answered and your promises with regard to my faith fulfilled. In the light of my request and her own desire she besought you daily, with powerful, heartfelt cry, to show her in a vision something of my future marriage; but you never con-

⁵⁴See Wis 1:16; Is 28:18.

⁵⁵See Sir 3:27.

⁵⁶See Gn 2:7.

sent. She did have some illusory, fantastic dreams, brought on by the activity of her own human spirit as she busied herself about this matter, and these she related to me, but without the confidence she usually showed when you revealed something to her: to these dreams she attached little importance. She claimed that by something akin to the sense of taste, a faculty she could not explain in words, she was able to distinguish between your revelations to her and the fantasies of her own dreaming soul.

All the same, the pressure on me was kept up, and an offer for a certain girl was made on my behalf; but she was about two years below marriageable age. I liked her, though, so we decided to wait.

Dream of an ideal community

14, 24. Many of my friends and I were greatly exercised in mind as we talked together and shared our loathing of the annoying upheavals inseparable from human life; and we almost made up our minds to live a life of leisure, far removed from the crowds. We would set up this place of leisurely retirement in such a way that any possessions we might have would be made available to the community and we would pool our resources in a single fund. The sincerity of our friendship should ensure that this thing should not belong to one person and that to another: there would be one single property formed out of many; the whole would belong to each of us, and all things would belong to all. It seemed to us that about ten people would be able to live like this in the same community and that there would be some exceptionally rich men among us, particularly our fellow-townsmen Romanianus; he had been very well known to me since childhood and had now been drawn to the court by the serious complexities of his business affairs. He was the most enthusiastic of all for this project, and his persuasion carried special weight inasmuch as he was far more wealthy than the rest. We agreed that two of us should be appointed as officials each year to see to necessary provisions, so that the others could be undisturbed.

But some of us were already married and others hoped to be, and as soon as we began to consider whether our womenfolk would consent to these arrangements the whole elaborate plan fell apart, came-

girl -
2 years
below
marriage

to pieces in our hands and had to be discarded. The sequel was sighs and groans and the redirection of our steps into the broad paths of the world,⁵⁷ because though our hearts were full of schemes, your design lasts for ever.⁵⁸ In the light of that design of yours you laughed at our plans while preparing your own, for you meant to give us our food in due time; you were to open your hand and fill our souls with your blessing.⁵⁹

Dismissal of Augustine's common-law wife; his grief

15, 25. Meanwhile my sins were multiplying, for the woman with whom I had been cohabiting was ripped from my side, being regarded as an obstacle to my marriage. So deeply was she engrafted into my heart that it was left torn and wounded and trailing blood. She had returned to Africa, vowing to you that she would never give herself to another man, and the son I had fathered by her was left with me. But I was too unhappy to follow a woman's example: I faced two years of waiting before I could marry the girl to whom I was betrothed, and I chafed at the delay, for I was no lover of marriage but the slave of lust. So I got myself another woman, in no sense a wife, that my soul's malady might be sustained in its pristine vigor or even aggravated, as it was conducted under the escort of inveterate custom into the realm of matrimony.

The wound inflicted on me by the earlier separation did not heal either. After the fever and the immediate acute pain had dulled, it putrefied, and the pain became a cold despair.

16, 26. Praise be to you, glory be to you,⁶⁰ O fount of all mercy! As I grew more and more miserable, you were drawing nearer. Already your right hand was ready to seize me and pull me out of the filth, yet I did not know it. The only thing that restrained me from being sucked still deeper into the whirlpool of carnal lusts was the fear of death and of your future judgment, which throughout all the swings of opinion had never been dislodged from my heart. With my friends Alypius and Nebridius I argued about the fate of the good

⁵⁷See Mt 7:13.

⁵⁸See Prv 19:21; Ps 32 (33):11.

⁵⁹See Ps 144 (145):15-16.

⁶⁰See 1 Chr 29:11-12.

and the wicked: I maintained that, as I saw it, Epicurus would have won the debate had I not believed that after death life remains for the soul, and so do the consequences of our moral actions; this Epicurus refused to believe. I posed this question: if we were immortal, and lived in a state of perpetual bodily pleasure without any fear of losing it, why should we not be happy? Would there be anything else to seek? I did not know that it was symptomatic of my vast misery that I had sunk so low, and was so blind, as to be incapable of even conceiving the light of a goodness, a beauty, which deserved to be embraced for its own sake, which the bodily eye sees not, though it is seen by the spirit within. Nor did I in my wretchedness consider what stream it was whence flowed to me the power to discuss even these distasteful things with my friends and still find sweetness in our talk, or whence came my inability to be happy, even in the sense in which I then understood happiness, without my friends, however lavishly supplied I might be with carnal luxuries. I loved these friends for their own sake, and felt myself loved by them for mine.

Oh, how tortuous were those paths! Woe betide the soul which supposes it will find something better if it forsakes you! Toss and turn as we may, now on our back, now side, now belly—our bed is hard at every point, for you alone are our rest. But lo! Here you are;⁶¹ you rescue us from our wretched meanderings and establish us on your way,⁶² you console us and bid us, "Run.⁶³ I will carry you, I will lead you and I will bring you home."⁶⁴

⁶¹See Ps 138 (139):8.

⁶²See Ps 31 (32):8; 85 (86):11.

⁶³See 1 Cor 9:24.

⁶⁴See Is 46:4.

ms
ab + ev. 11

it belonged to you. So you told the Athenians through your apostle that in you we live and move and have our being, and that indeed some of their own authorities had said this,⁴³ and unquestionably those books I read came from there. I disregarded the idols of the Egyptians, to which they paid homage with gold that belonged to you, for they perverted the truth of God into a lie, worshipping a creature and serving it rather than the creator.⁴⁴

He attempts Platonic ecstasy, but is "beaten back"

10, 16. Warned by these writings that I must return to myself, I entered under your guidance the innermost places of my being; but only because you had become my helper⁴⁵ was I able to do so. I entered, then, and with the vision of my spirit, such as it was, I saw the incommutable light⁴⁶ far above my spiritual ken, transcending my mind: not this common light which every carnal eye can see, nor any light of the same order but greater, as though this common light were shining much more powerfully, far more brightly, and so extensively as to fill the universe. The light I saw was not this common light at all, but something different, utterly different, from all these things. Nor was it higher than my mind in the sense that oil floats on water or the sky is above the earth; it was exalted because this very light made me, and I was below it because by it I was made. Anyone who knows truth knows it, and whoever knows it knows eternity. Love knows it.

O eternal Truth, true Love, and beloved Eternity, you are my God, and for you I sigh day and night.⁴⁷ As I first began to know you you lifted me up⁴⁸ and showed me that while that which I might see exists indeed, I was not yet capable of seeing it. Your rays beamed intensely upon me, beating back my feeble gaze, and I trembled with love and dread. I knew myself to be far away from you in a region of unlikeness, and I seemed to hear your voice from on high: "I am the food of the mature; grow then, and you will eat me. You will not

⁴³See Acts 17:28.

⁴⁴See Rom 1:25.

⁴⁵See Ps 29:11 (30:10)

⁴⁶See Jn 1:9.

⁴⁷See Ps 1:2; Jer 9:1; Ps 41:4 (42:3).

⁴⁸See Ps 26 (27):10.

change me into yourself like bodily food: you will be changed into me." And I recognized that you have chastened man for his sin and caused my soul to dwindle away like a spider's web,⁴⁹ and I said, "Is truth then a nothing, simply because it is not spread out through space either finite or infinite?" Then from afar you cried to me, "By no means, for I am who am."⁵⁰

I heard it as one hears a word in the heart, and no possibility of doubt remained to me; I could more easily have doubted that I was alive than that truth exists, truth that is seen and understood through the things that are made.

New light on the problem of evil

11, 17. Contemplating other things below you, I saw that they do not in the fullest sense exist, nor yet are they completely non-beings: they are real because they are from you, but unreal inasmuch as they are not what you are. For that alone truly is, which abides unchangingly. As for me, my good is to hold fast to God,⁵¹ for if I do not abide in him, I shall not be able to in myself; whereas he, abiding ever in himself, renews all things.⁵² You are my Lord, for you need no goods of mine.⁵³

12, 18. It was further made clear to me that things prone to destruction are good, since this destructibility would be out of the question if they were either supremely good or not good at all; because if they were supremely good they would be indestructible, whereas if they were not good at all there would be nothing in them that could be destroyed. Destruction is obviously harmful, yet it can do harm only by diminishing the good. It follows, then, that either destruction harms nothing, which is impossible, or that all things which suffer harm are being deprived of some good; this conclusion is beyond cavil. If, however, they lose all their good, they will not exist at all, for if they were to continue in existence without being any longer subject to destruction, they would be better, because per-

⁴⁹See Ps 38:12 (39:11).

⁵⁰Ex 3:14.

⁵¹See Ps 72 (73):28.

⁵²See Wis 7:27.

⁵³See Ps 15 (16):2.

Start here,
read to end of
chapter

manently indestructible; and what could be more outrageous than to declare them better for having lost everything that was good in them? Hence if they are deprived of all good, they will be simply non-existent; and so it follows that as long as they do exist, they are good.

Everything that exists is good, then; and so evil, the source of which I was seeking, cannot be a substance, because if it were, it would be good. Either it would be an indestructible substance, and that would mean it was very good indeed, or it would be a substance liable to destruction—but then it would not be destructible unless it were good.

I saw, then, for it was made clear to me, that you have made all good things, and that there are absolutely no substances that you have not made. I saw too that you have not made all things equal. They all exist because they are severally good but collectively very good, for our God has made all things *exceedingly good*.⁵⁴

13, 19. For you evil has no being at all; and this is true not of yourself only but of everything you have created, since apart from you there is nothing that could burst in and disrupt the order you have imposed on it. In some parts of it certain things are regarded as evil because they do not suit certain others; but these same things do fit in elsewhere, and they are good there, and good in themselves. All these things that are at odds with each other belong to the lower part of creation that we call earth, which has its own cloudy, windy sky, as befits it. Far be it from me ever to say, "These things ought not to be"; because even if I could see these things alone, and longed, certainly, for something better, it would already be incumbent on me to praise you for them alone; for on earth the dragons and all the depths proclaim you worthy of praise, as do the fire, hail, snow, ice and stormy winds that obey your word, the mountains and hills, fruit-bearing trees and all cedars, wild beasts and tame, creeping creatures and birds on the wing. Earth's kings and all its peoples, rulers and the world's judges, young men and maidens, old men and youths, all praise your name.⁵⁵ But since in heaven too your creatures praise you, our God, let all your angels tell your praises on high, let all your

⁵⁴Gn 1:31; Sir 39:21.

⁵⁵See Ps 148:7-12.

powers extol you, sun and moon, all stars and the light, the empyrean and the waters above the heavens: let them too praise your name.⁵⁶ No longer was I hankering for any elements to be better than they were, because I was now keeping the totality in view; and though I certainly esteemed the higher creatures above the lower, a more wholesome judgment showed me that the totality was better than the higher things on their own would have been.

14, 20. There is no wholesomeness⁵⁷ for those who find fault with anything you have created, as there was none for me when many of the things you have made displeased me. Since my soul did not dare to find my God displeasing, it was unwilling to admit that anything that displeased it was truly yours. This was why it had strayed away into believing in a duality of substances, but there it found no rest, and only mouthed the opinions of others. Turning back again it had made for itself a god extended through infinite space, all-pervasive, and had thought this god was you, and had set him up in its heart;⁵⁸ so it became yet again a temple for its own idol and an abomination in your sight. But when you cradled my stupid head and closed my eyes to the sight of vain things⁵⁹ so that I could absent me from myself awhile, and my unwholesome madness was lulled to sleep, then I awoke in you and saw you to be infinite, but in a different sense; and that vision in no way derived from the flesh.

15, 21. I turned my gaze to other things and saw that they owe their being to you and that all of them are by you defined, but in a particular sense: not as though contained in a place, but because you hold all things in your Truth as though in your hand; and all of them are true insofar as they exist, and nothing whatever is a deceit unless it is thought to be what it is not. I saw, further, that all things are set not only in their appropriate places but also in their proper times, and that you, who alone are eternal, did not set to work after incalculable stretches of time, because no stretches of time, neither those which have passed away nor those still to come, would pass or come except because you are at work and you abide eternally.

16, 22. Drawing on my own experience I found it unsurprising

⁵⁶See Ps 148:1-5.

⁵⁸See Ez 14:7.

⁵⁷See Ps 37:4 (38:3).

⁵⁹See Ps 118 (119):37.

sic as don't find pleasure in the good

that bread, which is pleasant to a healthy palate, is repugnant to a sick one, and that diseased eyes hate the light which to the unclouded is delightful. Villains find even your justice disagreeable, and snakes and maggots far more so, yet you have created these things good, and fit for the lower spheres of your world. Indeed, the villains themselves are fit only for these lower regions in the measure that they are unlike you, but for the higher when they come to resemble you more closely.

I inquired then what villainy might be, but I found no substance, only the perversity of a will twisted away from you, God, the supreme substance, toward the depths—a will that throws away its life within⁶⁰ and swells with vanity abroad.

Fresh attempt at mounting to God; he attains That Which Is

17, 23. I found it amazing that though I now loved your very self, and not some figment of imagination in place of you, I could not continue steadfastly in the enjoyment of my God. I was drawn toward you by your beauty but swiftly dragged away from you by my own weight, swept back headlong and groaning onto these things below myself; and this weight was carnal habit. Nonetheless the memory of you stayed with me, and I had no doubt whatever whom I ought to cling to, though I knew that I was not yet capable of clinging, because the perishable body weighs down the soul, and its earthly habitation oppresses a mind teeming with thoughts.⁶¹ I was fully persuaded that your invisible reality is plainly to be understood through created things, your everlasting power also, and your divinity,⁶² for I had been trying to understand how it was possible for me to appreciate the beauty of material things in the sky or on earth, and why the power to make sound judgments about changeable matters was readily available to me, so that I could say, "This thing ought to be like this, but that other different"; and in seeking the reason why I was able to judge as I did I realized that above my changeable mind soared the real, unchangeable truth, which is eternal.

⁶⁰See Sir 10:10.

⁶¹See Wis 9:15.

⁶²See Rom 1:20.

From struggle to imagine non-body to weight of own body.

mental as out of the soul (discovery) the intellect

Thus I pursued my inquiry by stages, from material things to the soul that perceives them through the body, and from there to that inner power of the soul to which the body's senses report external impressions. The intelligence of animals can reach as far as this.

I proceeded further and came to the power of discursive reason, to which the data of our senses are referred for judgment. Yet as found in me even reason acknowledged itself to be subject to change, and stretched upward to the source of its own intelligence, withholding its thoughts from the tyranny of habit and detaching itself from the swarms of noisy phantasms. It strove to discover what this light was that bedewed it when it cried out unhesitatingly that the Unchangeable is better than anything liable to change; it sought the fount whence flowed its concept of the Unchangeable—for unless it had in some fashion recognized Immutability, it could never with such certainty have judged it superior to things that change.

And then my mind attained to *That Which Is*, in the flash of one tremulous glance. Then indeed did I perceive your invisible reality through created things,⁶³ but to keep my gaze there was beyond my strength. I was forced back through weakness and returned to my familiar surroundings, bearing with me only a loving memory, one that yearned for something of which I had caught the fragrance, but could not yet feast upon.

He realizes the need for Christ the Mediator

18, 24. Accordingly I looked for a way to gain the strength I needed to enjoy you, but I did not until I embraced the mediator between God and humankind, the man Christ Jesus,⁶⁴ who also is God, supreme over all things and blessed for ever.⁶⁵ Not yet had I embraced him, though he called out, proclaiming, *I am the Way and Truth and the Life*,⁶⁶ nor had I known him as the food which, though I was not yet strong enough to eat it, he had mingled with our flesh; for the Word became flesh so that your Wisdom, through whom you

no strength until the mediator

⁶³See Rom 1:20.

⁶⁴See 1 Tm 2:5.

⁶⁵See Rom 9:5.

⁶⁶Jn 14:6.

*Christ
walks
w/ humanity*

created all things,⁶⁷ might become for us the milk adapted to our infancy. Not yet was I humble enough to grasp the humble Jesus as my God, nor did I know what his weakness had to teach. Your Word, the eternal Truth who towers above the higher spheres of your creation, raises up to himself those creatures who bow before him; but in these lower regions he has built himself a humble dwelling⁶⁸ from our clay,⁶⁹ and used it to cast down from their pretentious selves those who do not bow before him, and make a bridge to bring them to himself. He heals their swollen pride and nourishes their love, that they may not wander even farther away through self-confidence, but rather weaken as they see before their feet the Godhead grown weak⁷⁰ by sharing our garments of skin,⁷¹ and wearily fling themselves down upon him, so that he may arise and lift them up.

19, 25. I took a different view at the time, regarding Christ my Lord as no more than a man, though a man of excellent wisdom and without peer. I was the more firmly persuaded of this because he had been born of a virgin and made plain to us by his own example that disdain for temporal goods is a condition for winning immortality; and it seemed to me that through God's solicitude for us in this respect Christ's teaching had acquired incomparable authority. But I could not even begin to guess what a mystery was concealed in the Word made flesh. All I had understood from the facts about him handed down in the scriptures—as, for instance, that he ate, drank, slept, walked, experienced joy and sorrow and spoke to the people—was that his flesh was united to your Word only in conjunction with a human soul and a human consciousness. This must be obvious to anyone who has recognized the immutability of your Word, as I had insofar as I was able, and on this score I had no doubt. It is characteristic of the instability of our soul or mind that it can move its bodily limbs at one moment and not move them at another, can be affected now by some emotion and now again be unaffected, can give expression to wise sentiments at one time and at another remain silent. If these actions were reported of him falsely it would lay the entirety of

⁶⁷See Col 1:16.

⁷⁰See 1 Cor 1:25.

⁶⁸See Prv 9:1.

⁷¹See Gn 3:21.

⁶⁹See Gn 2:7.

the scriptures open to suspicion of lying, and then these writings would afford no possibility of saving faith to the human race. In fact, however, the scriptures are trustworthy; and so I acknowledged Christ to be a perfect man: not a human body only, nor a body with a human soul but lacking intelligence. Yet I held that this same man was to be preferred to others not because he was Truth in person, but on account of the outstanding excellence of his human nature and his more perfect participation in wisdom.

*Christ
only
as a
perfect
man*

Alypius thought that Catholics believed God to be clothed in flesh in such a way that there was in Christ nothing else but godhead and flesh; he did not think their preaching assigned to him a human soul or a human consciousness. Being firmly convinced that the actions Christ was remembered to have performed would have been impossible in the absence of a principle of created, rational life, Alypius was little disposed to Christian faith; but later on he recognized this error to be that of the Apollinarian heretics, and so he came to rejoice with Catholics in their faith and to acquiesce in it.

For my own part I admit that it was later still that I learned how sharply divergent is Catholic truth from the falsehood of Photinus with respect to the teaching that the Word was made flesh. Indeed the discrediting of heretics serves to throw into high relief the mind of your Church and the content of sound doctrine;⁷² for it was necessary for heresies to emerge in order to show up the people of sound faith among the weak.⁷³

*example of
the bad
way for
the good*

Christ the Way

20, 26. But in those days, after reading the books of the Platonists and following their advice to seek for truth beyond corporeal forms, I turned my gaze toward your invisible reality, trying to understand it through created things,⁷⁴ and though I was rebuffed I did perceive what that reality was which the darkness of my soul would not permit me to contemplate. I was certain that you exist, that you are infinite but not spread out through space either finite or infinite, and

⁷²See 1 Tm 1:10; 2 Tm 4:3-4; Ti 1:9; 2:1.

⁷⁴See Rom 1:20.

⁷³See 1 Cor 11:19.

*could not
contemplate
God directly—
soul too
dark*

that you exist in the fullest sense because you have always been the same,⁷⁵ unvarying in every respect and in no wise subject to change. All other things I saw to have their being from you,⁷⁶ and for this I needed but one unassailable proof—the fact that they exist. On these points I was quite certain, but I was far too weak to enjoy you. Yet I readily chattered as though skilled in the subject, and had I not been seeking your way in Christ our Savior⁷⁷ I would more probably have been killed than skilled. For I had already begun to covet a reputation for wisdom, and though fully punished I shed no tears of compunction; rather was I complacently puffed up with knowledge. Where was that charity which builds⁷⁸ on the foundation of humility that is Christ Jesus?⁷⁹ And when would those books have taught it to me? I believe that you willed me to stumble upon them before I gave my mind to your scriptures, so that the memory of how I had been affected by them might be impressed upon me when later I had been brought to a new gentleness through the study of your books, and your fingers were tending my wounds; thus insight would be mine to recognize the difference between presumption and confession, between those who see the goal but not the way to it and the Way to our beatific homeland, a homeland to be not merely descried but lived in. If I had first become well informed about your holy writings and you had grown sweet to me through my familiarity with them, and then I had afterward chanced upon those other volumes, they might perhaps have torn me loose from the strong root of piety, or else, if I had held firm in the salutary devotion I had absorbed, I might have supposed that it could be acquired equally well from those books, if everyone studied them and nothing else.

Augustine discovers Saint Paul

21, 27. It was therefore with intense eagerness that I seized on the hallowed calligraphy of your Spirit, and most especially the writings of the apostle Paul. In earlier days it had seemed to me that his teach-

⁷⁵See Ps 101:28 (102:27); Heb 1:12.
⁷⁶See Rom 11:36.
⁷⁷See Ti 1:4.

⁷⁸See 1 Cor 8:1; 13:4.
⁷⁹See 1 Cor 3:11.

ing was self-contradictory, and in conflict with the witness of the law and the prophets,⁸⁰ but now as these problems melted away your chaste words⁸¹ presented a single face to me, and I learned to rejoice with reverence.⁸²

So I began to read, and discovered that every truth I had read in those other books was taught here also, but now inseparably from your gift of grace, so that no one who sees can boast as though what he sees and the very power to see it were not from you—for who has anything that he has not received?⁸³ So totally is it a matter of grace that the searcher is not only invited to see you, who are ever the same,⁸⁴ but healed as well, so that he can possess you. Whoever is too far off to see may yet walk in the way that will bring him to the place of seeing and possession; for even though a person may be delighted with God's law as far as his inmost self is concerned, how is he to deal with that other law in his bodily members which strives against the law approved by his mind, delivering him as prisoner to the law of sin dominant in his body?⁸⁵ You are just, O Lord,⁸⁶ but we have sinned, and done wrong, and acted impiously,⁸⁷ and your hand has lain heavy upon us.⁸⁸ With good reason were we assigned to that ancient sinner who presides over death,⁸⁹ for he had seduced our will into imitating that perverse will of his by which he refused to stand fast in your truth.⁹⁰

What is a human wretch to do? Who will free him from this death-laden body, if not your grace, given through Jesus Christ our Lord,⁹¹ whom you have begotten coeternal with yourself and created at the beginning of all your works?⁹² In him the ruler of this world found nothing that deserved death,⁹³ yet slew him all the same; and so the record of debt that stood against us was annulled.⁹⁴

None of this is to be found in those other books. Not in those

⁸⁰See Mt 5:17; 7:12; Lk 16:16.

⁸¹See Ps 11:7 (12:6).

⁸²See Ps 2:11.

⁸³See 1 Cor 4:7.

⁸⁴See Ps 101:28 (102:27); Heb 1:12.

⁸⁵See Rom 7:22–23.

⁸⁶See Tb 3:2; Ps 118 (119):137.

⁸⁷See Dn 3:27, 29; 1 Kgs 8:47.

⁸⁸See Ps 31 (32):4.

⁸⁹See Heb 2:14.

⁹⁰See Jn 8:44.

⁹¹See Rom 7:24–25.

⁹²See Prv 8:22.

⁹³See Lk 23:14–15; Jn 14:30.

⁹⁴See Col 2:14.

Still at work

0.310/6
face

grace
invited
healing

pages are traced the lineaments of such loving kindness, or the tears of confession, or the sacrifice of an anguished spirit offered to you from a contrite and humbled heart,⁹⁵ or the salvation of a people, or a city chosen to be your bride,⁹⁶ or the pledge of the Holy Spirit,⁹⁷ or the cup of our ransom. Not there is anyone heard to sing, *Shall not my soul surrender itself to God? For my salvation comes from him. He is my very God, my Savior, my protector, and I shall waver no more.*⁹⁸ No one there hearkens to a voice calling, *Come to me, all you who struggle.* They are too scornful to learn from him, because he is gentle and humble of heart,⁹⁹ and you have hidden these things from the sagacious and shrewd, and revealed them to little ones.¹⁰⁰

It is one thing to survey our peaceful homeland from a wooded height but fail to find the way there, and make vain attempts to travel through impassable terrain, while fugitive deserters marshaled by the lion and the dragon¹⁰¹ obstruct and lurk in ambush; and quite another to walk steadily in the way that leads there, along the well-built road opened up by the heavenly emperor, where no deserters from the celestial army dare commit robbery, for they avoid that way like torment.

In awe-inspiring ways these truths were striking deep roots within me as I read the least of your apostles;¹⁰² I had contemplated your works and was filled with dread.¹⁰³

⁹⁵See Ps 50:19 (51:17).

⁹⁶See Rv 21:2.

⁹⁷See 2 Cor 5:5; 1:22.

⁹⁸Ps 61:2-3 (62:1-2).

⁹⁹See Mt 11:28-29.

¹⁰⁰See Mt 11:25.

¹⁰¹See Ps 90 (91):13.

¹⁰²See 1 Cor 15:9.

¹⁰³See Hab 3:2.

Book VIII

CONVERSION

1, 1. In a spirit of thankfulness let me recall the mercies you lavished on me, O my God; to you let me confess them.¹ May I be flooded with love for you until my very bones cry out, "Who is like you, O Lord?"² Let me offer you a sacrifice of praise, for you have snapped my bonds.³ How you broke them I will relate, so that all your worshipers who hear my tale may exclaim, "Blessed be the Lord, blessed in heaven and on earth, for great and wonderful is his name."⁴

Your words were now firmly implanted in my heart of hearts, and I was besieged by you on every side.⁵ Concerning your eternal life I was now quite certain, though I had but glimpsed it like a tantalizing reflection in a mirror;⁶ this had been enough to take from me any lingering doubt concerning that imperishable substance from which every other substance derives its being. What I now longed for was not greater certainty about you, but a more steadfast abiding in you. In my daily life everything seemed to be teetering, and my heart needed to be cleansed of the old leaven.⁷ I was attracted to the Way, which is our Savior himself, but the narrowness of the path daunted me and I still could not walk in it.⁸

You inspired in me the idea that I ought to go to Simplicianus, and even I could see the sense of this. I regarded him as your good servant, a man from whom grace radiated. Moreover I had heard how from his youth he had lived for you in complete dedication, and since he was an old man by now I assumed that after following your way of life for long years and with such noble zeal he must be rich in

¹See Ps 85 (86):13; Is 63:7.

²See Ps 34 (35):10.

³See Ps 115 (116):16-17.

⁴See Ps 134 (135):6; 75:2 (76:1); 8:2 (1).

⁵See Is 29:2.

⁶See 1 Cor 13:12.

⁷See 1 Cor 5:7-8.

⁸See Mt 7:14.

experience and deeply learned. And so indeed he was. I hoped, therefore, that if I could discuss my perplexities with him he would bring out from his storehouse⁹ appropriate advice as to how a man in my condition might walk in your way.

2. Surveying the full assembly of the Church I observed that people's lifestyles varied. For my own part I was irked by the secular business I was conducting, for no longer was I fired by ambition, and prepared on that account to endure such heavy servitude in the hope of reputation and wealth, as had formerly been the case. Those prospects held no charm for me now that I was in love with your tender kindness and the beauty of your house;¹⁰ but I was in tight bondage to a woman. The apostle did not forbid me to marry, although he did propose a better choice, earnestly wishing that everyone might live as he did himself;¹¹ but I was too weak for that and inclined to an easier course. For this reason alone I was vacillating, bored and listless amid my shriveled cares because I was forced to adapt myself to other aspects of conjugal life to which I had pledged and constrained myself, though they were little to my liking. From the lips of your Truth I had heard that there are eunuchs who have castrated themselves for love of the kingdom of heaven, but the saying continues, *Let anyone accept this who can*.¹²

How foolish are they who know not God! So many good things before their eyes, yet *Him Who Is* they fail to see.¹³ I was trapped in that foolishness no longer, for I had left it behind by hearkening to the concerted witness of your whole creation, and had discovered you, our creator, and your Word, who dwells with you and is with you the one sole God, through whom you have created all things.¹⁴ But there are impious people of another type, who do recognize God yet have not glorified him as God, nor given him thanks.¹⁵ Into that error too I had formerly blundered, but your right hand grasped me,¹⁶ plucked me out of it and put me in a place where I could be

⁹See Mt 13:52.

¹⁰See Ps 25 (26):8.

¹¹See 1 Cor 7:7-8.

¹²Mt 19:12.

¹³See Wis 13:1.

¹⁴See Jn 1:1-3.

¹⁵See Rom 1:21.

¹⁶See Ps 117:36 (118:35).

healed, for you have told us that *reverence for God—that is wisdom*,¹⁷ and warned us, *Do not give yourself airs for wisdom*, because *those who believed themselves wise have sunk into folly*.¹⁸ I had found a precious pearl, worth buying at the cost of all I had;¹⁹ but I went on hesitating.

Conversation with Simplicianus

2, 3. Accordingly I made my way to Simplicianus. When Ambrose, then bishop, had been baptized, Simplicianus had stood as father to him, and Ambrose regarded him with affection as a father indeed. To him I described the winding paths of my wayward life. When I mentioned that I had read certain Platonist books, translated into Latin by Victorinus, who had formerly been a rhetorician in Rome but had, as I had heard, died a Christian, Simplicianus told me how fortunate I was not to have stumbled on the writings of other philosophers, works full of fallacies and dishonesty that smacked of the principles of this world,²⁰ whereas those Platonist writings conveyed in every possible way, albeit indirectly, the truth of God and his Word.

Story of Victorinus' conversion

He went on to reminisce about this Victorinus with the object of inculcating in me that humility of Christ which is hidden from the sagacious but revealed to little ones.²¹ He knew him intimately in Rome, and he told me a story about Victorinus which I will not pass over in silence, since it powerfully redounds to the praise of your grace and moves me to confession, this story of a deeply learned old man.

Thoroughly conversant with all the liberal arts, Victorinus had also read widely and with discrimination in philosophy and had taught many a noble senator; in recognition of his distinction as a

¹⁷Jb 28:28.

¹⁸Prv 26:5; Rom 1:22.

¹⁹See Mt 13:46; 19:21.

²⁰See Col 2:8.

²¹See Mt 11:25.

teacher a statue had been erected to him in the Roman forum, which was a very high honor in the eyes of worldly people, and one he well deserved. Until this period of his life he had been a worshiper of idols and shared the abominable superstitions which at that time blew like an ill wind through almost the whole of the Roman nobility, who were agog for Pelusium and for

Anubis, dog-voiced god, and monstrous deities
of many a hue, who warred in days gone by
against Minerva, Neptune, Venus. . . .

These gods Rome had once vanquished, but now worshiped, and the elderly Victorinus with his terrible thunders had habitually defended their cults; yet he was not ashamed to become a child of your Christ and be born as an infant from your font, bending his neck to the yoke of humility²² and accepting on his docile brow the sign of the ignominious cross.²³

4. O Lord, Lord, who bade your heavens stoop, who touched the mountains and set them smoking,²⁴ by what means did you make your hidden way into that man's breast? The story as Simplicianus told it to me was this. Victorinus was in the habit of reading holy scripture and intensively studying all the Christian writings, which he subjected to close scrutiny; and he would say to Simplicianus, not openly but in private, intimate conversation, "I am already a Christian, you know." But the other always replied, "I will not believe that, nor count you among Christians, until I see you in Christ's Church." Victorinus would chaff him: "It's the walls that make Christians, then?" He would often talk like this, claiming that he was a Christian. Simplicianus often responded in the same way, and Victorinus would frequently repeat his joke about walls.

The fact was that he was sorely afraid of upsetting the proud demon-worshippers who were his friends, fearing that the weight of their resentment might come storming down on him from the peak of their Babylonian grandeur, as though from lofty cedars on

²²See Sir 51:34; Jer 27:12; Mt 11:29.

²³See Gal 5:11.

²⁴See Ps 143 (144):5.

Lebanon not yet felled by the Lord.²⁵ But later he drank in courage from his avid reading and came to fear that he might be disowned by Christ before his holy angels if he feared to confess him before men and women.²⁶ In his own eyes he was guilty of a great crime in being ashamed of the holy mysteries instituted by your humble Word, while feeling no shame at the sacrilegious rites of proud demons, whose likeness he had been proud to assume himself. Accordingly he threw off the shamefacedness provoked by vanity and became modest in the face of truth: suddenly and without warning he said to Simplicianus, who told this tale, "Let us go to church: I want to become a Christian."

Hardly able to contain his joy, Simplicianus went with him. He was initiated into the first stage of the catechumenate, and not long afterward he gave in his name, asking for rebirth in baptism. Rome stood amazed, while the Church was jubilant. The proud looked on and fumed with anger; they ground their teeth in impotent fury;²⁷ but as for your servant, the Lord God was his hope, and he had no eyes for vanities or lying follies.²⁸

5. Eventually the time came for him to make his profession of faith. Custom decrees that those who are approaching your grace in baptism make their profession in the presence of the baptized community of Rome, standing on a raised platform and using a set form of words which has been entrusted to them and committed to memory. Simplicianus told me that Victorinus had been offered by the priests the option of making his statement more privately, for it was customary to offer this concession to people who were likely to lose their nerve through shyness, but that he had chosen rather to proclaim his salvation before the holy company. What he taught in rhetoric was not salvation, he said, yet he had professed that publicly enough. If he was not afraid to address crowds of crazy people in his own words, how much less ought he to fear your peaceable flock as he uttered your Word?

As he climbed up to repeat the Creed they all shouted his name to one another in a clamorous outburst of thanksgiving—everyone

²⁵See Ps 28 (29):5.

²⁶See Mk 8:38 and par.

²⁷See Ps 111 (112):10.

²⁸See Ps 39:5 (40:4).

rescued one
joy from
comfort

who knew him, that is, and was there anyone present who did not? Then in more subdued tones the word passed from joyful mouth to joyful mouth among them all: "Victorinus, Victorinus!" Spontaneous was their shout of delight as they saw him, and spontaneous their attentive silence to hear him. With magnificent confidence he proclaimed the true faith, and all the people longed to clasp him tenderly to their hearts. And so they did, by loving him and rejoicing with him, for those affections were like clasping hands.

3, 6. O God, who are so good, what is it in the human heart that makes us rejoice more intensely over the salvation of a soul which is despaired of but then freed from grave danger, than we would if there had always been good prospects for it and its peril slighter? You too, merciful Father, yes, even you are more joyful over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.²⁹ And we likewise listen with overflowing gladness when we hear how the shepherd carries back on exultant shoulders the sheep that had strayed,³⁰ and how the coin is returned to your treasury as neighbors share the glee of the woman who found it,³¹ while the joy of your eucharistic assembly wrings tears from us when the story is read in your house of a younger son who *was dead, but has come back to life, was lost but is found*.³² You express your own joy through ours, and through the joy of your angels who are made holy by their holy charity; for you yourself are ever the same,³³ and all transient things, things which cannot abide constantly in their mode of being, are known to your unchanging intelligence.

7. What is going on in our minds, then, that we should be more highly delighted at finding cherished objects, or having them restored to us, than if we had always kept them safe? Other instances bear this out, and all our experience shouts its corroboration, "Yes, truly this is so." A victorious emperor celebrates his triumph. He would not have been victorious had there been no war, and the more imperiled he has been in battle, the more elated he is in his triumph.

²⁹See Lk 15:4-7.

³⁰See Lk 15:4-6; Ps 118 (119):176.

³¹See Lk 15:8-9.

³²Lk 15:24-32.

³³See Ps 101:28 (102:27).

Or a storm batters mariners and threatens them with shipwreck. Every face pales at the prospect of death, but sky and sea grow calm, and the sailors' joy is as intense as lately was their fear. Or someone we love falls sick. His pulse betrays the gravity of his condition, and all who long for his recovery are equally tormented in their minds. Then he takes a turn for the better, and although he is not yet walking with his pristine vigor there is already such joy as never there was when in earlier days he strode about well and strong.

Even the natural pleasures of human life are attained through distress, not only through the unexpected calamities that befall against our will but also through deliberate and planned discomfort. There is no pleasure in eating and drinking unless the discomfort of hunger and thirst have preceded them. Drunkards eat somewhat salty food to induce a searing, parched sensation, which will be deliciously quenched by a drink. Then again, custom requires that after betrothal brides shall not be handed over immediately, lest after marriage a man hold cheap the woman for whom he did not as a bridegroom have to sigh and wait.

8. This law holds for shameful, demeaning pleasure, but the same is true for what is permitted and lawful, the same for the most sincere and honorable friendship, and the same for that young man who had died but come back to life, had perished but was found. In every case greater sorrow issues in greater joy. How can this be, O Lord my God, when you are yourself your own eternal joy, and all around you heaven rejoices in you eternally? Why is it that our part of creation swings between decay and growth, pain and reconciliation? Perhaps because this is the proper mode of being for these things and with this alone you endowed them when from highest heaven to the lowest places of the earth, from the dawn of the ages to their end, from angel to tiny worm, from the first stirring of change to the last, you assigned all classes of good things and all your righteous works to their appropriate places, and activated them at their proper times?

Ah, how high you are in the heights of heaven,³⁴ how deep in the

³⁴See Ps 112 (113):4-5; Is 33:5.

depths! From no place are you absent, yet how tardily do we return to you!

4, 9. Come, Lord, arouse us and call us back, kindle us and seize us, prove to us how sweet you are in your burning tenderness; let us love you and run to you.³⁵ Are there not many who return to you from a deeper, blinder pit than did Victorinus, many who draw near to you and are illumined³⁶ as they welcome the light, and in welcoming it receive from you the power to become children of God?³⁷ Yet if they are less well known to the populace, even people who do know them find less joy in their conversion, because whenever joy is shared among many, even the gladness of individuals is increased, for all are affected by the common enthusiasm and they catch the flame from one another. Moreover, the fact that these converts are generally known ensures that they become for many an authoritative example pointing toward salvation; they forge ahead of crowds that will follow. That is why many who have made the journey before them rejoice particularly, with an eye to others besides these lone individuals.

Forbid it, Lord, that rich personages should ever be more welcome in your tabernacle than the poor, or the nobility than lowly folk,³⁸ when your own preferential choice fell upon the weak things of this world in order to shame the strong, upon lowly things, contemptible things and nonentities, as though they really were, to set at nought the things that are.³⁹ Nevertheless the least of your apostles,⁴⁰ through whose tongue you sent those words re-echoing, loved to be called not by his former name, "Saul," but "Paul," to commemorate that glorious victory when the proconsul Paulus,⁴¹ his pride beaten down by the apostle's arms, was brought under Christ's lenient yoke to become a common subject of the great King. The enemy is more thoroughly trounced in a person over whom he had a more powerful hold, or through whom he had a hold over a greater

³⁵See Sg 1:2-3.

³⁶See Ps 33:6 (34:5).

³⁷See Jn 1:9, 12.

³⁸See Dt 1:17; 16:19; Sir 42:1; Acts 10:34;

Jas 2:1-9.

³⁹See 1 Cor 1:27-28; Rom 4:17.

⁴⁰See 1 Cor 15:9.

⁴¹See Acts 13:7-12.

number of others; and stronger is his grip over those who on pretext of nobility are proud, stronger too his hold over many another on pretext of their authority.

The higher, then, the value set on the soul of Victorinus, which the devil had captured as an impregnable stronghold, and on Victorinus' tongue, which the devil had wielded like a huge, sharp weapon to destroy many, the greater was the gladness with which your children rightly rejoiced on seeing the powerful foe bound by our King⁴² and his weaponry seized, cleaned, and made fit to serve in your honor as equipment useful to the Master for every good purpose.⁴³

Augustine longs to imitate him, but is hindered by lustful habit

5, 10. On hearing this story I was fired to imitate Victorinus; indeed it was to this end that your servant Simplicianus had related it. But he added a further point. When in the reign of the Emperor Julian a law was passed which forbade Christians to teach literature and rhetoric, Victorinus willingly complied, for he preferred to abandon his school of talkativeness rather than forsake your word, through which you impart eloquence to the tongues of speechless babes.⁴⁴ In my eyes he appeared not so much heroic as all the happier for having taken this step, since it afforded him the opportunity to be at leisure for you. I ached for a like chance myself, for it was no iron chain imposed by anyone else that fettered me, but the iron of my own will. The enemy had my power of willing in his clutches, and from it had forged a chain to bind me. The truth is that disordered lust springs from a perverted will; when lust is pandered to, a habit is formed; when habit is not checked, it hardens into compulsion. These were like interlinking rings forming what I have described as a chain, and my harsh servitude used it to keep me under duress. A new will had begun to emerge in me, the will to worship you disinterestedly⁴⁵ and enjoy you, O God, our only sure felicity; but it was not yet capable of surmounting that earlier will strengthened by

⁴²See Mt 12:29.

⁴³See 2 Tm 2:21.

⁴⁴See Wis 10:21.

⁴⁵See Jb 1:9.

habit of compulsion at his lust.
new will
earlier will
disordered will
perverted will
habit of compulsion

inveterate custom. And so the two wills fought it out—the old and the new,⁴⁶ the one carnal, the other spiritual—and in their struggle tore my soul apart.

11. I thus came to understand from my own experience what I had read, how the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit strives against the flesh.⁴⁷ I was aligned with both, but more with the desires I approved in myself than with those I frowned upon, for in these latter I was not really the agent, since for the most part I was enduring them against my will rather than acting freely.⁴⁸ All the same, the force of habit that fought against me had grown fiercer by my own doing, because I had come willingly to this point where I now wished not to be. And who has any right to object, when just punishment catches up with a sinner?

I had grown used to pretending that the only reason why I had not yet turned my back on the world to serve you was that my perception of the truth was uncertain, but that excuse was no longer available to me, for by now it was certain. But I was still entangled by the earth and refused to enlist in your service,⁴⁹ for the prospect of being freed from all these encumbrances frightened me as much as the encumbrances themselves ought to have done.

12. I was thus weighed down by the pleasant-burden of the world in the way one commonly is by sleep, and the thoughts with which I attempted to meditate upon you⁵⁰ were like the efforts of people who are trying to wake up, but are overpowered and immersed once more in slumberous deeps. No one wants to be asleep all the time, and it is generally agreed among sensible people that being awake is a better state, yet it often happens that a person puts off the moment when he must shake himself out of sleep because his limbs are heavy with a lassitude that pulls him toward the more attractive alternative, even though he is already trying to resist it and the hour for rising has come; in a similar way I was quite sure that surrendering myself to your love would be better than succumbing to my lust, but while the former course commended itself and was beginning to

⁴⁶See Eph 4:22–24; Col 3:9–10.

⁴⁷See Gal 5:17.

⁴⁸See Rom 7:16–17.

⁴⁹See 2 Tm 2:4.

⁵⁰See Ps 62:7 (63:6).

conquer, the latter charmed and chained me. I had no answer to give as you said to me, *Arise, sleeper, rise from the dead: Christ will enlighten you*,⁵¹ and plied me with evidence that you spoke truly; no, I was convinced by the truth and had no answer whatever except the sluggish, drowsy words, “Just a minute,” “One more minute,” “Let me have a little longer.” But these “minutes” never diminished, and my “little longer” lasted inordinately long.

To find my delight in your law as far as my inmost self was concerned was of no profit to me when a different law in my bodily members was warring against the law of my mind, imprisoning me under the law of sin which held sway in my lower self. For the law of sin is that brute force of habit whereby the mind is dragged along and held fast against its will, and deservedly so because it slipped into the habit willingly. In my wretched state, who was there to free me from this death-doomed body, save your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord?⁵²

Conversation with Ponticianus

6, 13. Now I will relate how you set me free from a craving for sexual gratification which fettered me like a tight-drawn chain, and from my enslavement to worldly affairs: I will confess to your name, O Lord,⁵³ my helper and redeemer.

I continued to attend to my accustomed duties, but with mounting anxiety. I longed for you every day and spent as much time in your church as could be spared from my business, under the weight of which I was groaning. With me was Alypius, who since his third stint as assessor⁵⁴ had been without legal advisory work, and was now looking round for clients to whom he might once more sell his counsel, just as I was trying to sell the art of speaking, insofar as it ever can be imparted by teaching. Nebridius, however, yielding to our friendly persuasion, had consented to act as assistant teacher to Verecundus, a citizen and schoolmaster of Milan who was very well known to us all. This man had most earnestly desired reliable help

⁵¹Eph 5:14.

⁵²See Rom 7:24–25.

⁵³See Ps 53:8 (54:6).

⁵⁴See VI, 10, 16.

from someone of our company, for he stood in sore need of it, and he had reinforced his insistent plea by appealing to his close association with us. Nebridius was not, therefore, attracted to this post by ambition for the advantages it might bring him, for he could have done better by the profession of literature, had he willed; he undertook it simply as a kindly service because, being such a very gentle and accommodating friend, he was unwilling to set our request aside. He carried out his duties with the utmost discretion, taking care not to attract the attention of persons whom the world regarded as important. He thus steered clear of any mental disturbance they might have caused him, for he wanted to keep his mind free and disengaged for as much of his time as he possibly could, with a view to research and to reading or listening to anything connected with wisdom.

14. On a certain day when Nebridius was absent (I forget why), something happened. A man named Ponticianus, who held an important post at court, came to our house to visit Alypius and me; being an African he was our compatriot, and he wanted something or other from us. We sat down together and talked. His eye happened to light upon a book that lay on a gaming table nearby; he picked it up, opened it and found it to be the letters of the apostle Paul. This was certainly unexpected, for he had supposed it to be the kind of thing I exhausted myself in teaching. But then he smiled, looked up at me and offered his congratulations, surprised by his sudden discovery that those writings, and those alone, were under my eye. He was himself a baptized Christian and made a practice of prostrating himself in church before you, our God, in frequent and prolonged prayers. When I remarked that I was applying myself to intensive study of those scriptures, he began to tell us about the monk Antony of Egypt, whose name was illustrious and held in high honor among your servants, though we had never heard it until this moment. When Ponticianus learned this he dwelt more fully on the subject, enlightening us about the great man; he was astonished at our ignorance. But we were stupefied as we listened to the tale of the wonders you had worked within the true faith of the Catholic Church, especially as they were most firmly attested by recent memory and had occurred so near to our own times. So all of us were

amazed: we because they were so tremendous, and he because we had never heard of them.

15. His discourse led on from this topic to the proliferation of monasteries, the sweet fragrance rising up to you from the lives of monks, and the fecund wastelands of the desert. We had known nothing of all this. There was even a monastery full of good brothers at Milan, outside the city walls, under Ambrose's care, yet we were unaware of it.

Story of conversion of two court officials at Trier

Ponticianus went on talking and developing the theme, while we listened, spellbound. So it came about that he told us that one day when the court was at Trier he and three of his colleagues went out for a walk in the gardens abutting on the walls, while the emperor was occupied with the morning show at the circus. Now it happened that as they strolled about they split into pairs, one companion staying with Ponticianus while the other two went off by themselves. In their wandering these latter chanced upon a cottage where some servants of yours were living, men poor in spirit, the kind of people to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs.⁵⁵ There they found a book which contained *The Life of Antony*. One of them began to read it. His admiration and enthusiasm were aroused, and as he read he began to mull over the possibility of appropriating the same kind of life for himself, by renouncing his secular career to serve you alone. (He belonged to the ranks of so-called administrative officers.) Then quite suddenly he was filled with a love of holiness and a realistic sense of shame and disgust with himself;⁵⁶ he turned his gaze toward his friend and demanded, "Tell me: where do we hope all our efforts are going to get us? What are we looking for? In whose cause are we striving? Does life at court promise us anything better than promotion to being Friends of the Emperor? And once we are, will that not be a precarious position, fraught with perils? Will it not mean negotiating many a hazard, only to end in greater danger still?"

⁵⁵See Mt 5:3.

⁵⁶See Ps 4:5 (4).

And how long would it take us to get there? Whereas I can become a friend of God⁵⁷ here and now if I want to."

Even as he spoke he was in labor with the new life that was struggling to birth within him. He directed his eyes back to the page, and as he read a change began to occur in that hidden place within him where you alone can see; his mind was being stripped of the world, as presently became apparent. The flood tide of his heart leapt on, and at last he broke off his reading with a groan as he discerned the right course and determined to take it. By now he belonged to you. "I have already torn myself away from the ambitions we cherished, and have made up my mind to serve God," he told his friend. "I am going to set about it this very moment and in this place. If you have no stomach to imitate me, at least don't stand in my way." The other replied that he would bear him company, both in the noble reward and in the glorious combat. And both of them, now enlisted in your service, began to build their tower, knowing the cost full well: they abandoned all their possessions and followed you.⁵⁸

Meanwhile Ponticianus was walking with his companion through other parts of the garden. In search of their friends they arrived at the place, and on finding them there urged them to return, for it was growing late. They, however, told their story, announcing the plan on which they had resolved and describing how the will to take this course had arisen within them and grown firm; and they begged their friends at least to place no obstacles in their way, if they had no mind to join them. Ponticianus and his companion shed tears on their own account, as he related, even though they were in no way altered from the men they had been. They offered devout congratulations to their friends and commended themselves to their prayers; then they went back to the palace, dragging heavy hearts along the ground, while their friends stayed in the cottage with hearts set on heaven. Both were engaged to be married, and when their fiancées later heard of their decision, they likewise dedicated their virginity to you.

7, 16. Ponticianus went on with his story; but, Lord, even while he spoke you were wrenching me back toward myself, and pulling me

⁵⁷See Jas 2:23; Jdt 8:22.

⁵⁸See Lk 14:28; Mt 19:27; Lk 5:11, 28.

round from that standpoint behind my back⁵⁹ which I had taken to avoid looking at myself. You set me down before my face,⁶⁰ forcing me to mark how despicable I was, how misshapen and begrimed, filthy and festering. I saw and shuddered. If I tried to turn my gaze away, he went on relentlessly telling his tale, and you set me before myself once more, thrusting me into my sight that I might perceive my sin and hate it.⁶¹ I had been aware of it all along, but I had been glossing over it, suppressing it and forgetting.

17. But now self-abhorrence possessed me all the harsher as my heart went out more ardently to those young men, and I heard of the blessed impulsiveness with which they had without reserve handed themselves over to you for healing. By contrast with them I felt myself loathsome, remembering how many of my years—twelve, perhaps—had gone to waste, and I with them, since my nineteenth year when I was aroused to pursue wisdom by the reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*. I had been putting off the moment when by spurning earthly happiness I would clear space in my life to search for wisdom; yet even to seek it, let alone find it, would have been more rewarding than discovery of treasure or possession of all this world's kingdoms, or having every bodily pleasure at my beck and call. I had been extremely miserable in adolescence, miserable from its very onset, and as I prayed to you for the gift of chastity I had even pleaded, "Grant me chastity and self-control, but please not yet." I was afraid that you might hear me immediately and heal me forthwith of the morbid lust which I was more anxious to satisfy than to snuff out. So I had wandered off into the crooked paths⁶² of a sacrilegious superstition, not because I had any certainty about it but because I preferred it to other beliefs—not that I was investigating these in any spirit of reverence: rather was I opposing them with malicious intent.

18. I had been telling myself that my reason for putting off day after day⁶³ the decision to renounce worldly ambition and follow you alone was that I could as yet see no certain light by which to steer

⁵⁹See Jer 2:27.

⁶⁰See Ps 49 (50):21.

⁶¹See Ps 35:3 (36:2).

⁶²See Sir 2:16.

⁶³See Sir 5:8.

my course. But the day had dawned when I was stripped naked in my own eyes and my conscience challenged me within: "Where is your ready tongue now? You have been professing yourself reluctant to throw off your load of illusion because truth was uncertain. Well, it is certain now, yet the burden still weighs you down, while other people are given wings on freer shoulders,⁶⁴ people who have not worn themselves out with research, nor spent a decade and more reflecting on these questions."

My conscience gnawed away at me in this fashion, and I was fiercely shamed and flung into hideous confusion while Ponticianus was relating all this. Having brought the conversation to a close and settled his business with us, he returned to his place, and I to myself.

Was anything left unsaid in my inner debate? Was there any whip of sage advice I left unused to lash my soul into coming with me, as I tried to follow you? It fought and resisted, but could find no excuse. All its arguments had been used up and refuted, but there remained a dumb dread: frightful as death seemed the restraining of habit's oozy discharge, that very seepage which was rotting it to death.

Struggle in the garden

8, 19. Within the house of my spirit the violent conflict raged on, the quarrel with my soul that I had so powerfully provoked in our secret dwelling, my heart,⁶⁵ and at the height of it I rushed to Alypius with my mental anguish plain upon my face. "What is happening to us?" I exclaimed. "What does this mean? What did you make of it? The untaught are rising up and taking heaven by storm,⁶⁶ while we with all our dreary teachings are still groveling in this world of flesh and blood!⁶⁷ Are we ashamed to follow, just because they have taken the lead, yet not ashamed of lacking the courage even to follow?" Some such words as these I spoke, and then my frenzy tore me away from him, while he regarded me in silent bewilderment. Unusual, certainly, was my speech, but my brow, cheeks and eyes, my flushed

⁶⁴See Ps 54:7 (55:6).
⁶⁵See Mt 6:6.

⁶⁶See Mt 11:12.
⁶⁷See 1 Cor 15:50; Mt 16:17; Gal 1:16.

countenance and the cadences of my voice expressed my mind more fully than the words I uttered.

Adjacent to our lodgings was a small garden. We were free to make use of it as well as of the house, for our host, who owned the house, did not live there. The tumult in my breast had swept me away to this place, where no one would interfere with the blazing dispute I had engaged in with myself until it should be resolved. What the outcome would be you knew, not I. All I knew was that I was going mad, but for the sake of my sanity, and dying that I might live, aware of the evil that I was but unaware of the good I was soon to become. So I went out into the garden and Alypius followed at my heels; my privacy was not infringed by his presence, and, in any case, how could he abandon me in that state? We sat down as far as possible from the house. I was groaning in spirit⁶⁸ and shaken by violent anger because I could form no resolve to enter into a covenant with you, though in my bones I knew that this was what I ought to do,⁶⁹ and everything in me lauded such a course to the skies. It was a journey not to be undertaken by ship or carriage or on foot,⁷⁰ nor need it take me even that short distance I had walked from the house to the place where we were sitting; for to travel—and more, to reach journey's end—was nothing else but to want to go there, but to want it valiantly and with all my heart, not to whirl and toss this way and that a will half crippled by the struggle, as part of it rose up to walk while part sank down.

20. While this vacillation was at its most intense many of my bodily gestures were of the kind that people sometimes want to perform but cannot, either because the requisite limbs are missing, or because they are bound and restricted, or paralyzed through illness, or in some other way impeded. If I tore out my hair, battered my forehead, entwined my fingers and clasped them round my knee, I did so because I wanted to. I might have wanted to but found myself unable, if my limbs had not been mobile enough to obey. So then, there were plenty of actions that I performed where willing was not

⁶⁸See Jn 11:33.
⁶⁹See Ps 34 (35):10.

⁷⁰See I, 18, 28.

rising up to heaven

could form no resolve

crippled will

disobeying it
but not
willing
it

the same thing as being able; yet I was not doing the one thing that was incomparably more desirable to me, the thing that I would be able to do as soon as I willed, because as soon as I willed—why, then, I would be willing it! For in this sole instance the faculty to act and the will to act precisely coincide, and the willing is already the doing. Yet this was not happening. My body was more ready to obey the slightest whim of my soul in the matter of moving my limbs, than the soul was to obey its own command in carrying out this major volition, which was to be accomplished within the will alone.

9, 21. How did this bizarre situation arise, how develop? May your mercy shed light on my inquiry, so that perhaps an answer may be found in the mysterious punishments meted out to humankind, those utterly baffling pains that afflict the children of Adam. How then did this bizarre situation arise, how develop? The mind commands the body and is instantly obeyed; the mind commands itself, and meets with resistance. When the mind orders the hand to move, so smooth is the compliance that command can scarcely be distinguished from execution; yet the mind is mind, while the hand is body. When the mind issues its command that the mind itself should will something (and the mind so commanded is no other than itself), it fails to do so. How did this bizarre situation arise, how develop? As I say, the mind commands itself to will something: it would not be giving the order if it did not want this thing; yet it does not do what it commands.

Evidently, then, it does not want this thing with the whole of itself, and therefore the command does not proceed from an undivided mind. Inasmuch as it issues the command, it does will it, but inasmuch as the command is not carried out, it does not will it. What the will is ordering is that a certain volition should exist, and this volition is not some alien thing, but its very self. Hence it cannot be giving the order with its whole self. It cannot be identical with that thing which it is commanding to come into existence, for if it were whole and entire it would not command itself to be, since it would be already.

This partial willing and partial non-willing is thus not so bizarre, but a sickness of the mind, which cannot rise with its whole self on

the wings of truth because it is heavily burdened by habit. There are two wills, then, and neither is the whole; what one has the other lacks.

two wills
not two
natures
(Plato's
horse)
Phaedrus

10, 22. Some there are who on perceiving two wills engaged in deliberation assert that in us there are two natures, one good, the other evil, each with a mind of its own. Let them perish from your presence, O God,⁷¹ as perish all who talk wildly and lead our minds astray.⁷² They are evil themselves as long as they hold these opinions, yet these same people will be good if they embrace true opinions and assent to true teaching, and so merit the apostle's commendation, *You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord.*⁷³ The trouble is that they want to be light not in the Lord but in themselves, with their notion that the soul is by nature divine, and so they have become denser darkness still, because by their appalling arrogance they have moved further away from you, the true Light, who enlighten everyone who comes into the world.⁷⁴ I warn these people, Take stock of what you are saying, and let it shame you; but once draw near to him and be illumined, and your faces will not blush with shame.⁷⁵ When I was making up my mind to serve the Lord my God⁷⁶ at last, as I had long since purposed, I was the one who wanted to follow that course, and I was the one who wanted not to. I was the only one involved. I neither wanted it wholeheartedly nor turned from it wholeheartedly. I was at odds with myself, and fragmenting myself. This disintegration was occurring without my consent, but what it indicated was not the presence in me of a mind belonging to some alien nature but the punishment undergone by my own. In this sense, and this sense only, it was not I who brought it about, but the sin that dwelt within me⁷⁷ as penalty for that other sin committed with greater freedom for I was a son of Adam.

God's
vs
own
light

disintegrated

original
sin

23. Moreover, if we were to take the number of conflicting urges to signify the number of natures present in us, we should have to

⁷¹See Ps 67:3 (68:2).
⁷²See Ti 1:10.
⁷³Eph 5:8.
⁷⁴See Jn 1:9.

⁷⁵See Ps 33:6 (34:5).
⁷⁶See Dt 6:13; Mt 4:10; Jer 30:9.
⁷⁷See Rom 7:17, 20.

Fragmenting
Self
sin & disorder
study 10, 22

many
 assume that there are not two, but many. If someone is trying to make up his mind whether to go to a Manichean conventicle or to the theater, the Manichees declare, "There you are, there's the evidence for two natures: the good one is dragging him our way, the bad one is pulling him back in the other direction. How else explain this dithering between contradictory wills?" But I regard both as bad, the one that leads him to them and the one that lures him back to the theater. They, on the contrary, think that an inclination toward them can only be good.

But consider this: suppose one of our people is deliberating, and as two desires clash he is undecided whether to go to the theater or to our church, will not our opponents too be undecided what attitude to take? Either they will have to admit that it is good will that leads a person to our church, just as good as that which leads to theirs the people who are initiated into their sacred rites and trapped there—and this they are unwilling to admit; or they will conclude that two evil natures and two bad minds are pitted against each other within one person, in which case their habitual assertion of one good and one evil nature will be erroneous; or, finally, they will be brought round to the truth and no longer deny that when a person is deliberating there is but one soul, thrown into turmoil by divergent impulses.

W
 24. When, therefore, they observe two conflicting impulses within one person, let them stop saying that two hostile minds are at war, one good, the other evil, and that these derive from two hostile substances and two hostile principles. For you are true, O God, and so you chide and rebuke them and prove them wrong. The choice may lie between two impulses that are both evil, as when a person is debating whether to murder someone with poison or a dagger; whether to annex this part of another man's property or that, assuming he cannot get both; whether to buy himself pleasure by extravagant spending or hoard his money out of avarice; whether to go to the circus or the theater if both performances are on the same day—and I would even add a third possibility: whether to go and steal from someone else's house while he has the chance, and a fourth as well: whether to commit adultery while he is about it. All these

impulses may occur together, at exactly the same time, and all be equally tempting, but they cannot all be acted upon at once. The mind is then rent apart by the plethora of desirable objects as four inclinations, or even more, do battle among themselves; yet the Manichees do not claim that there are as many disparate substances in us as this.

The same holds true for good impulses. I would put these questions to them: Is it good to find delight in a reading from the apostle? To enjoy the serenity of a psalm? To discuss the gospel? To each point they will reply, "Yes, that is good." Where does that leave us? If all these things tug at our will with equal force, and all together at the same time, will not these divergent inclinations put a great strain on the human heart, as we deliberate which to select? All are good, but they compete among themselves until one is chosen, to which the will, hitherto distracted between many options, may move as a united whole. So too when the joys of eternity call us from above, and pleasure in temporal prosperity holds us fast below, our one soul is in no state to embrace either with its entire will. Claimed by truth for the one, to the other clamped by custom, the soul is torn apart in its distress.

11, 25. Such was the sickness in which I agonized, blaming myself more sharply than ever, turning and twisting in my chain as I strove to tear free from it completely, for slender indeed was the bond that still held me. But hold me it did. In my secret heart you stood by me, Lord, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame in the severity of your mercy, lest I give up the struggle and that slender, fragile bond that remained be not broken after all, but thicken again and constrict me more tightly. "Let it be now," I was saying to myself. "Now is the moment, let it be now," and merely by saying this I was moving toward the decision. I would almost achieve it, but then fall just short; yet I did not slip right down to my starting-point, but stood aside to get my breath back. Then I would make a fresh attempt, and now I was almost there, almost there . . . I was touching the goal, grasping it . . . and then I was not there, not touching, not grasping it. I shrank from dying to death and living to life, for ingrained evil was more powerful in me than new-grafted good.

I consider

disorderly
leaving

willing
or
passing
?

The nearer it came, that moment when I would be changed, the more it pierced me with terror. Dismayed, but not quite dislodged, I was left hanging.

26. The frivolity of frivolous aims, the futility of futile pursuits,⁷⁸ these things that had been my cronies of long standing, still held me back, plucking softly at my garment of flesh and murmuring in my ear, "Do you mean to get rid of us? Shall we never be your companions again after that moment . . . never . . . never again? From that time onward so-and-so will be forbidden to you, all your life long." And what was it that they were reminding me of by those words, "so-and-so," O my God, what were they bringing to my mind? May your mercy banish such memories far from me! What foul deeds were they not hinting at, what disgraceful exploits! But now their voices were less than half as loud, for they no longer confronted me directly to argue their case, but muttered behind my back and slyly tweaked me as I walked away, trying to make me look back. Yet they did slow me down, for I could not bring myself to tear free and shake them off and leap across to that place whither I was summoned, while aggressive habit still taunted me: "Do you imagine you will be able to live without these things?"

27. The taunts had begun to sound much less persuasive, however; for a revelation was coming to me from that country toward which I was facing, but into which I trembled to cross. There I beheld the chaste, dignified figure of Continence. Calm and cheerful was her manner, though modest, pure and honorable her charm as she coaxed me to come and hesitate no longer, stretching kindly hands to welcome and embrace me, hands filled with a wealth of heartening examples. A multitude of boys and girls were there, a great concourse of youth and persons of every age, venerable widows and women grown old in their virginity, and in all of them I saw that this same Continence was by no means sterile, but the fruitful mother of children⁷⁹ conceived in joy from you, her Bridegroom. She was smiling at me, but with a challenging smile, as though to say, "Can you not do what these men have done, these women? Could any of them achieve it by their own strength, without the

⁷⁸See Eccl 1:2; 12:8.

⁷⁹See Ps 112 (113):9.

Lord their God? He it was, the Lord their God, who granted me to them. Why try to stand by yourself, only to lose your footing? Cast yourself on him and do not be afraid: he will not step back and let you fall. Cast yourself upon him trustfully; he will support and heal you." And I was bitterly ashamed, because I could still hear the murmurs of those frivolities, and I was still in suspense, still hanging back. Again she appealed to me, as though urging, "Close your ears against those unclean parts of you which belong to the earth⁸⁰ and let them be put to death. They tell you titillating tales, but have nothing to do with the law of the Lord your God."⁸¹

All this argument in my heart raged only between myself and myself. Alypius stood fast at my side, silently awaiting the outcome of my unprecedented agitation.

12, 28. But as this deep meditation dredged all my wretchedness up from the secret profundity of my being and heaped it all together before the eyes of my heart, a huge storm blew up within me and brought on a heavy rain of tears. In order to pour them out unchecked with the sobs that accompanied them I arose and left Alypius, for solitude seemed to me more suitable for the business of weeping. I withdrew far enough to ensure that his presence—even his—would not be burdensome to me. This was my need, and he understood it, for I think I had risen to my feet and blurted out something, my voice already choked with tears. He accordingly remained, in stunned amazement, at the place where we had been sitting. I flung myself down somehow under a fig-tree and gave free rein to the tears that burst from my eyes like rivers, as an acceptable sacrifice to you.⁸² Many things I had to say to you, and the gist of them, though not the precise words, was: "O Lord, how long?⁸³ How long? Will you be angry for ever? Do not remember our age-old sins."⁸⁴ For by these I was conscious of being held prisoner. I uttered cries of misery: "Why must I go on saying, 'Tomorrow . . . tomorrow'? Why not now? Why not put an end to my depravity this very hour?"

⁸⁰See Col 3:5.

⁸¹See Ps 118 (119):85.

⁸²See Ps 50:19 (51:17).

⁸³See Ps 6:4 (3).

⁸⁴See Ps 78 (79):5, 8.

Cast yourself!

foul deeds speak

vision of (substance) (a vision of grace)

calling cool to act.

"Pick it up and read"

29. I went on talking like this and weeping in the intense bitterness of my broken heart.⁸⁵ Suddenly I heard a voice from a house nearby—perhaps a voice of some boy or girl, I do not know—singing over and over again, "Pick it up and read, pick it up and read." My expression immediately altered and I began to think hard whether children ordinarily repeated a ditty like this in any sort of game, but I could not recall ever having heard it anywhere else. I stemmed the flood of tears and rose to my feet, believing that this could be nothing other than a divine command to open the Book and read the first passage I chanced upon; for I had heard the story of how Antony had been instructed by a gospel text. He happened to arrive while the gospel was being read, and took the words to be addressed to himself when he heard, *Go and sell all you possess and give the money to the poor: you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*⁸⁶ So he was promptly converted to you by this plainly divine message. Stung into action, I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting, for on leaving it I had put down there the book of the apostle's letters. I snatched it up, opened it and read in silence the passage on which my eyes first lighted: *Not in dissipation and drunkenness, nor in debauchery and lewdness, nor in arguing and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires.*⁸⁷ I had no wish to read further, nor was there need. No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away.

Conversion of Augustine and Alypius; Monica's joy

30. I closed the book, marking the place with a finger between the leaves or by some other means, and told Alypius what had happened. My face was peaceful now. He in return told me what had been happening to him without my knowledge. He asked to see

⁸⁵See Ps 50:19 (51:17).⁸⁶Mt 19:21.⁸⁷Rom 13:13-14.

what I had read: I showed him, but he looked further than my reading had taken me. I did not know what followed, but the next verse was, *Make room for the person who is weak in faith.*⁸⁸ He referred this text to himself and interpreted it to me. Confirmed by this admonition he associated himself with my decision and good purpose without any upheaval or delay, for it was entirely in harmony with his own moral character, which for a long time now had been far, far better than mine.

We went indoors and told my mother, who was overjoyed. When we related to her how it had happened she was filled with triumphant delight and blessed you, who have power to do more than we ask or understand,⁸⁹ for she saw that you had granted her much more in my regard than she had been wont to beg of you in her wretched, tearful groaning. Many years earlier you had shown her a vision of me standing on the rule of faith;⁹⁰ and now indeed I stood there, no longer seeking a wife or entertaining any worldly hope, for you had converted me to yourself. In so doing you had also converted her grief into a joy⁹¹ far more abundant than she had desired, and much more tender and chaste than she could ever have looked to find in grandchildren from my flesh.

⁸⁸Rom 14:1.⁸⁹See Eph 3:10.⁹⁰See III, 11, 19.⁹¹See Ps 29:12 (30:11).