
Saint Augustine

(354-420)

The North African village of Tagaste (now Souk-Ahras, Algeria), about fifty miles inland from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, was the birthplace of one of the most influential of all Christian writers. Augustinus, better known to us as St. Augustine, was born there November 13, 354 A.D., the son of a very devout Christian mother and a somewhat careless and debauched pagan father.

Although he learned Punic in his youth, Augustine preferred Latin, the language of the upper class. His first education came at the knee of his beloved mother, Monica. However, he hated his elementary instruction in the village school because of the severe whippings he received. His parents laughed at his complaints, and so it was that his most fervent early prayers were to be saved from the beatings of his schoolmaster. As an adult he admitted that he had received a good education, but refused to use such tactics himself. (It is said that because of this he had discipline problems later as a teacher.)

In 370, he began his higher studies in rhetoric at Carthage, a major city of the region. An outstanding student, he led his class in rhetoric, yet found time to engage in love affairs and participate in various other student escapades. During the thirteen years he studied and taught there, he became an accomplished rhetorician, won a poetry prize, took a mistress, and fathered a son whom he named Adeodatus (God's Gift). It was also at Carthage that he was attracted to Manicheism, fascinated by its depiction of the world as a battleground for the equally powerful forces of good and evil.

In 383 he traveled to Rome, where he soon abandoned Manicheism for Academic skepticism, and a year later he obtained a good position in Milan as a teacher of rhetoric. It appears that he also hoped to marry a rich wife there who would facilitate his professional career. During all this time he was not a baptized Christian, and he did not attend church services regularly. His mother had enrolled him as a catechumen shortly after his birth, but she had followed the local custom of deferring baptism until early adulthood to erase youthful sins.

In hopes of winning him back to Christianity, his mother arranged a very advantageous marriage with a girl who was two years too young to be married. Since it was such a good match, Augustine decided to give up his mistress and wait for the

two years. Regretfully, he sent his mistress back to Africa and kept their son with him. The two years proved to be too much for his lust, however, and he took another mistress—much to the despair of his mother. His prayer at the time was, "Grant me chastity and continency, but not yet." Finally, Augustine came under the influence of St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. After a powerful spiritual experience in the summer of 386 he was converted to Catholicism. On the eve of Easter 387 he was baptized by Bishop Ambrose and became a new man.

In this same year he wrote the work from which our first selection is taken: *On the Christian Way of Life*. In it he discusses man's chief good—what it is, how it is attained, and how one may preserve it. Augustine points out that the chief good can not be something which could be lost against one's will since were that the case there could be no confidence in possessing it. Consequently, the greatest good must be of the soul rather than of the body, because things of the body can be lost against the will. However, the chief good must not be the soul by itself, but rather that which gives perfection to the soul, and only virtue fulfills that requirement. Moreover, in the same manner, the soul only attains virtue by following God. Therefore, man's chief good is the possession of a virtuous soul which in turn is obtained by avoiding sin and obeying the will of God. It is interesting to compare this definition and discussion of virtue and the chief good of man with those described in our previous readings taken from Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Epictetus, and the Bible. Some assert that the writings of Augustine provide an effective assimilation of Greek and Roman philosophy into Christian dogma.

Our second selection comes from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, the most widely read and best-known of all his works. Our selection contains chapters IV-X of Book II, written between 397 and 400, and dealing with the sins of his sixteenth year of life. (Note that these "books" are about the size of a chapter in modern publications while his "chapters" are sometimes only a paragraph in length.) In these "chapters" he relates how he and his friends stole some pears which they did not really want or need. Why, then, did they steal them? He considers this, and concludes that only a corrupt desire to defy God's will provided the motivation. Although we tend to define a "confession" as being either a public or private admission of guilt, there are at least two other meanings for the "confessions" of Augustine. His is not only a simple confession of sin, but also a confession of faith and even a confession of praise. Note how each of these is intertwined with the other two. Consider also why Augustine condemns the youthful crime so harshly. (It helps to explain the "twisted and intricate knottiness" of which he speaks near the end of the selection.)

The greatest of the four Fathers of the Latin Church, St. Augustine exerted, and continues to exert today, a formidable influence upon the culture of the Western world. A glimpse of what he was to mean for the future of Christianity in Europe is provided by his treatise *On Christian Doctrine* being made a required reading in nearly all the monastic schools. Near the end of the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great read and reread the *Confessions*. In the eighth century, Charlemagne used his *City of God* almost as he would a Bible. Over six hundred years after Charlemagne, Martin Luther joined the Augustinian order of monks and adopted many of Augustine's teachings to his own use. And today an average of over five hundred studies of his life and works continue to be published each year. His profound wisdom and deep insights into the workings of the human soul evoke a responsive chord in the hearts of men all over the world. It is Augustine's belief that wisdom is available to all who seek it. However, it requires an active mind and personal participation. In the same manner, he feels

that knowledge of God and life in Christianity are open to all humans whether or not they study philosophy. Augustine regarded his early philosophical searching as necessary preparation for his later conversion to Christianity. Nonetheless, the actual conversion came about through the grace of God rather than through his own efforts. Thus, he believes that following God is the only sure pathway to man's chief good.

glh

from *On the Christian Way of Life*

[Happiness is in the enjoyment of man's chief good. Two conditions of the chief good: First, nothing is better than it; Second, it cannot be lost against the will.]

How then, according to reason, ought man to live? We all certainly desire to live happily; and there is no human being but assents to this statement almost before it is made. But the title happy cannot, in my opinion, belong to either him who has not what he loves, whatever it may be, or to him who has what he loves if it is hurtful, or to him who does not love what he has, although it is good in perfection. For one who seeks what he cannot obtain suffers torture, and one who has got what is not desirable is cheated, and one who does not seek for what is worth seeking for is diseased. Now in all these cases the mind cannot reside at the same time in one man; so in none of these cases can the man be happy. I find, then, a fourth case, where the happy life exists, --when that which is man's chief good is both loved and possessed. For what do we call enjoyment but having at hand the object of love? And no one can be happy who does not enjoy what is man's chief good, nor is there any one who enjoys this who is not happy. We must then have at hand our chief good, if we think of living happily.

We must now inquire what is man's chief good, which of course cannot be anything inferior to man himself. For whoever follows after what is inferior to himself, becomes himself inferior. But every man is bound to follow what is best. And that is why man's chief good is not inferior to man. Is it then something similar to man himself? It must be so, if there is nothing above man which he is capable of enjoying. But if we find something which is both superior to man, and can be possessed by the man who loves it, who can doubt that in seeking for happiness man should endeavour to reach that which is more excellent than the being who makes the endeavour? For if happiness consists in the enjoyment of a good than which there is nothing better, which we call the chief good, how can a man be properly called happy who has not yet attained to his chief good? Or how can that be the chief good beyond which something better remains for us to arrive at? Such, then, being the chief good, it must be something which cannot be lost against the will. For one can feel confident regarding a good which he knows can be taken from him, although he wishes to keep and cherish it. But if a man feels no confidence regarding the good which he enjoys, how can he be happy while in such fear of losing it?

[Man - What?]

Let us then see what is better than man. This must necessarily be hard to find, unless we first ask and examine what man is. I am not now called upon to give a definition of man. The question here seems to me to be, -- since almost all agree, or at least, which is enough, those I have now to do with are of the same opinion with

me, that we are made up of soul and body, -- What is man? Is he both of these? or is he the body only, or the soul only? For although the things are two, soul and body, and although neither without the other could be called man (for the body would not be man without the soul, nor again would the soul be man if there were not a body animated by it), still it is possible that one of these may be held to be man, and may be called so. What then do we call man? Is he soul and body, as in a double harness, or like a centaur? Or, do we mean the body only, as being in the service of the soul which rules, as the word lamp denotes not the light and the case together, but only the case, though on account of the light? Or do we mean only mind, and that on account of the body which rules it, as horseman means not the man and the horse, but the man only, and that as employed in ruling the horse? This dispute is not easy to settle; or, if the proof is plain, the statement requires time. This is an expenditure of time and strength which we need not incur. For whether the name man belongs to both, or only to the soul, the chief good of man is not the chief good of the body; but what is the chief good either of both soul and body, or of the soul only, that is man's chief good. Man's chief good is not the chief good of the body only, but the chief good of the soul.

[Man's chief good is not the chief good of the body only, but the chief good of the soul]

Now if we ask what is the chief good of the body, reason obliges us to admit that it is that by means of which the body comes to be in its best state. But of all the things which invigorate the body, there is nothing better or greater than the soul. The chief good of the body, then, is not bodily pleasure, not absence of pain, not strength, not beauty, not swiftness, or whatever else is usually reckoned among the goods of the body, but simply the soul. For all the things mentioned the soul supplies to the body by its presence, and, what is above them all, life. Hence I conclude that the soul is not the chief good of man, whether we give the name of man to the soul and body together, or to the soul alone. For as, according to reason, the chief good of the body is that which is better than the body, and from which the body receives vigor and life, so whether the soul itself is man, or soul and body both, we must discover whether there is anything which goes before the soul itself, in following which the soul comes to the perfection of good of which it is capable in its own kind. If such a thing can be found, all uncertainty must be at an end, and we must pronounce this to be really and truly the chief good of man.

If, again, the body is man, it must be admitted that the soul is the chief good of man. But clearly, when we treat of morals, —when we inquire what manner of life must be held in order to obtain happiness, —it is not the body to which we discuss. In short, the observance of good customs belongs to that part of us which inquires and learns, which are the prerogatives of the soul; so, when we speak of attaining to virtue, the question does not regard the body. But if it follows, as it does, that the body which is ruled over by a soul possessed of virtue is ruled both better and more honorably, and is in its greatest perfection in consequence of the perfection of the soul which rightfully governs it, that which gives perfection to the soul will be man's chief good, though we call the body man. For if my coachman, in obedience to me, feeds and drives the horses he has charge of in the most satisfactory manner, himself enjoying the more of my bounty in proportion to his good conduct, can any one deny that the good condition of the horses, as well as that of the coachman, is due to me? So the question seems to me to be not, whether soul and body is man, or the soul only, or body only, but what

gives perfection to the soul; for when this is obtained, a man cannot but be either perfect, or at least much better than in the absence of this one thing.

[Virtue gives perfection to soul; the soul obtains virtue by following God; following God is the happy life.]

No one will question that virtue gives perfection to the soul. But it is the very proper subject of inquiry whether this virtue can exist by itself or only in the soul. Here again arises a profound discussion, needing lengthy treatment; but perhaps my summary will serve the purpose. God will, I trust, assist me, so that, notwithstanding our feebleness, we may give instruction on these great matters briefly as well as intelligibly. In either case, whether virtue can exist by itself without the soul, or can exist only in the soul, undoubtedly in the pursuit of virtue the soul follows after something, and this must be either the soul itself, or virtue, or something else. But if the soul follows after itself in the pursuit of virtue, it follows after a foolish thing; for before obtaining virtue it is foolish. Now the height of a follower's desire is to reach that which he follows after. So the soul must either not wish to reach what it follows after, which is utterly absurd and unreasonable, or, in following after itself while foolish, it reaches the folly which it flees from. But if it follows after virtue in the desire to reach it, how can it follow what does not exist? or how can it desire to reach what it already possesses? Either, therefore, virtue exists beyond the soul, or if we are not allowed to give the name of virtue except to the habit and disposition of the wise soul, which can exist only in the soul, we must allow that the soul follows after something else in order that virtue may be produced in itself; for neither by following after nothing, nor by following after folly, can the soul, according to my reasoning, attain to wisdom.

This is something else, then, by following after which the soul becomes possessed of virtue and wisdom, is either a wise man or God. But we have said already that it must be something that we cannot lose against our will. No one can think it necessary to ask whether a wise man, supposing we are content to follow after him, can be taken from us in spite of our willingness or our persistence. God then remains, in following after whom we live well, and in reaching whom we live both well and happily.

from the *Confessions* [Book II, Chapters iv-x, "The Pear Tree"]

Your law, O Lord, punishes theft; and this law is so written in the hearts of men that not even the breaking of it blots it out: for no thief bears calmly being stolen from--not even if he is rich and the other steals through want. Yet I chose to steal, and not because want drove me to it--unless a want of justice and contempt for it and an excess for iniquity. For I stole things which I already had in plenty and of better quality. Nor had I any desire to enjoy the things I stole, but only the stealing of them and the sin. There was a pear tree near our vineyard, heavy with fruit, but fruit that was not particularly tempting either to look at or to taste. A group of young blackguards, and I among them, went out to knock down the pears and carry them off late one night, for it was our bad habit to carry on our games in the streets till very late. We carried off an immense load of pears, not to eat--for we barely tasted them

before throwing them to the hogs. Our only pleasure in doing it was that it was forbidden. Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart: yet in the depth of the abyss You had pity on it. Let that heart now tell You what it sought when I was thus evil for no object, having no cause for wrongdoing save my wrongness. The malice of the act was base and I loved it--that is to say I loved my own undoing, I loved the evil in me--not the thing for which I did the evil, simply the evil: my soul was depraved, and hurled itself down from security in You into utter destruction, seeking no profit from wickedness but only to be wicked.

There is an appeal to the eye in beautiful things, in gold and silver and all such; the sense of touch has its own powerful pleasures; and the other senses find qualities in things suited to them. Wordly success has its glory, and the power to command and to overcome: and from this springs the thirst for revenge. But in our quest of all these things, we must not depart from You, Lord, or deviate from Your Law. This life we live here below has its own attractiveness, grounded in the measure of beauty it has and its harmony with the beauty of all lesser things. The bond of human friendship is admirable, holding many souls as one. Yet in the enjoyment of all such things we commit sin if through immoderate inclination to them--for though they are good, they are of the lowest order of good--things higher and better are forgotten, even You, O Lord our God, and Your Truth and Your Law. These lower things have their delights but not such as my God has, for He made them all: *and in Him doth the righteous delight, and He is the joy of the upright of heart.*

Now when we ask why this or that particular evil act was done, it is normal to assume that it could not have been done save through the desire of gaining or the fear of losing some one of these lower goods. For they have their own charm and their own beauty, though compared with the higher values of heaven they are poor and mean enough. Such a man has committed a murder. Why? He wanted the other man's wife or his property; or he had chosen robbery as a means of livelihood; or he feared to lose this or that through his victim's act; or he had been wronged and was aflame for vengeance. Would any man commit a murder for no cause, for the sheer delight of murdering? The thing would be incredible. There is of course the case of the man [Catiline] who was said to be so stupidly and savagely cruel that he practised cruelty and evil even when he had nothing to gain by them. But even there a cause was stated--he did it, he said, lest through idleness his hand or his resolution should grow slack. And why did he want to prevent that? So that one day by the multiplication of his crimes the city should be his, and he would have gained honors and authority and riches, and would no longer be in fear of the law or in the difficulties that want of money and the awareness of his crimes had brought him. So that not even Catiline loved his crimes as crimes: he loved some other thing which was his reason for committing them.

What was it then that in my wretched folly I loved in you, O theft of mine, deed wrought in that dark night when I was sixteen? For you were not lovely: you were a theft. Or are you anything at all, that I should talk with you? The pears that we stole were beautiful for they were created by Thee, Thou most Beautiful of all, Creator of all, Thou good God, my Sovereign and true Good. The pears were beautiful but it was not pears that my empty soul desired. For I had any numbe of better pears of my own, and plucked those only that I might steal. For once I had gathered them I threw them away, tasting only my own sin and savouring that with delight; for if I took so much as a bite of any one of those pears, it was the sin that sweetened it. And now, Lord my God, I ask what was it that attracted me in that theft, for there was no beauty in it to

attract. I do not mean merely that it lacked the beauty that there is in justice and prudence, or in the mind of man or his senses and vegetative life: or even so much as the beauty and glory of the stars in the heavens, or of earth and sea with their oncoming of new life to replace the generations that pass. It had not even that false show or shadow of beauty by which sin tempts us.

[For there is a certain show of beauty in sin.] Thus pride wears the mask of loftiness of spirit, although You alone, O God, are high over all. Ambition seeks honor and glory, although You alone are to be honored before all and glorious forever. By cruelty the great seek to be feared, yet who is to be feared but God alone: from His power what can be wrested away, or when or where or how or by whom? The caresses by which the lustful seduce are a seeking for love: but nothing is more caressing than Your charity, nor is anything more healthfully loved than Your supremely lovely, supremely luminous Truth. Curiosity may be regarded as a desire for knowledge, whereas You supremely know all things. Ignorance and sheer stupidity hide under the names of simplicity and innocence: yet no being has simplicity like to Yours: and none is more innocent than You, for it is their own deeds that harm the wicked. Sloth pretends that it wants quietude: but what sure rest is there save the Lord? Luxurioussness would be called abundance and completeness; but You are the fullness and inexhaustible abundance of incorruptible delight. Wastefulness is a parody of generosity: but You are the infinitely generous giver of all good. Avarice wants to possess overmuch: but You possess all. Enviousness claims that it strives to excel: but what can excel before You? Anger clamors for just vengeance: but whose vengeance is so just as Yours? Fear is the recoil from a new and sudden threat to something one holds dear, and a cautious regard for one's own safety: but nothing new or sudden can happen to You, nothing can threaten Your hold upon things loved, and where is safety secure save in You? Grief pines at the loss of things in which desire delighted: for it wills to be like to You from whom nothing can be taken away.

Thus the soul is guilty of fornication when she turns from You and seeks from any other source what she will nowhere find pure and without taint unless she returns to You. Thus even those who go from You and stand up against You are still perversely imitating You. But by the mere fact of their imitation, they declare that You are the creator of all that is, and that there is nowhere for them to go where You are not.

So once again what did I enjoy in that theft of mine? Of what excellence of my Lord was I making perverse and vicious imitation? Perhaps it was the thrill of acting against You law--at least in appearance, since I had no power to do so in fact, the delight a prisoner might have in making some small gesture of liberty--getting a deceptive sense of omnipotence from doing something forbidden without immediate punishment. I was that slave, who fled from his Lord and pursued his Lord's shadow. O rottenness, O monstrousness of life and abyss of death! Could you find pleasure only in what was forbidden, and only because it was forbidden?

What shall I render unto the Lord, that I can recall these things and yet not be afraid! I shall love Thee, Lord, and shall give thanks to Thee and confess Thy name, because Thou hast forgiven me such great sins and evil deeds. I know that it is only by Thy grace and mercy that Thou hast melted away the ice of my sins. And the evil I have not done, that also I know is by Thy grace: for what might I not have done, seeing that I loved evil solely because it was evil? I confess that Thou hast forgiven

all alike--the sins I committed of my own motion, the sins I would have committed but for Thy grace.

Would any man, considering his own weakness, dare to attribute his chastity or his innocence to his own powers and so love Thee less--as if he did not need the same mercy as those who return to Thee after sin. If any man has heard Thy voice and followed it and done none of the things he finds me here recording and confessing, still he must not scorn me: for I am healed by the same doctor who preserved him from falling into sickness, or at least into such grievous sickness. But let him love Thee even more: seeing me rescued out of such sickness of sin, and himself saved from falling into such sickness of sin, by the one same Saviour.

What fruit therefore had I (in my vileness) in those things of which I am now ashamed? Especially in that piece of thieving, in which I loved nothing except the thievery--though that in itself was no *thing* and I only the more wretched for it.

Now--as I think back on the state of my mind then--I am altogether certain that I would not have done it alone. Perhaps then what I really loved was the companionship of those with whom I did it. If so, can I still say that I loved nothing over and above the thievery? Surely I can; that companionship was nothing over and above, because it was nothing. What is the truth of it? Who shall show me, unless He that illumines my heart and brings light into its dark places? What is the thing that I am trying to get at in all this discussion? If I had liked the pears that I stole and wanted to enjoy eating them, I might have committed the offence alone, if that had been sufficient, to get me the pleasure I wanted; I should not have needed to inflame the itch of my desires by rubbing against accomplices. But since the pleasure I got was not in the pears, it must have been in the crime itself, and put there by the companionship of others sinning with me.

What was my feeling in all this? Depraved, undoubtedly, and woe is me that I had it. But what exactly was it? *Who can understand sins?* We laughed together as if our hearts were tickled to be playing a trick upon the owners, who had no notion of what we were doing and would very strongly have objected. But what delight did I find in that which I should not equally have found if I had done it alone? Because we are not much given to laughing when we are alone? Not much given, perhaps, but laughter does sometimes overcome a man when no one else is about, if something especially ridiculous is seen or heard or floats into the mind. Yet I would not have done this by myself: quite definitely I would not have done it by myself.

Here, then, O God, is the memory still vivid in my mind. I would not have omitted that theft alone: my pleasure in it was not what I stole but that I stole: yet I would not have enjoyed doing it, I would not have done it, alone. O friendship unfriendly, unanalysable attraction for the mind, greediness to do damage for the mere sport and jest of it, desire for another's loss with no gain to oneself or vengeance to be satisfied! Someone cries "Come on, let's do it"--and we would be ashamed to be ashamed!

Who can unravel that complex twisted knottedness? It is unclean, I hate to think of it or look at it. I long for Thee, O Justice and Innocence, Joy and Beauty of the clear of sight, I long for Thee with unquenchable longing. There is sure repose in Thee and life untroubled. He that enters into Thee, enters into the joy of his Lord and shall not fear and shall be well in Him who is the Best. I went away from Thee, my God, in my youth I strayed too far from Thy sustaining power, and I became to myself a barren land.