

Aurelius Augustine

• A Sinful Life •

“Instantly, as the sentence ended...all the gloom of doubt vanished away.”



(354-430)

Augustine's life and ministry has left an indelible mark on the history of the church. He was an able defender of the Christian faith whose writings were deeply founded in personal experience.

Augustine was a son of the many prayers of his mother, Monica. She had the greatest impact upon his life in the years leading up to his dynamic experience of salvation. Part of that impact was in her relating a vision to Augustine that revealed he would one day be saved in answer to her prayers.

As a youth Augustine lived a checkered life. He dabbled in rhetoric, theater, philosophy, and heresy. At the same time, he lived a sinful life with one mistress and then another. The inability within himself to give up his lust and sinful way of life eventually became the focal point of his struggle that led him to find Christ.

In her deep desire to win Augustine to the Lord, his mother would often entreat others with tears to plead with him. One such person was a faithful bishop, who declined because he felt Augustine was not yet in a state to hear the gospel. The bishop left her with these words: "Leave him there, and only pray to God for him; he will discover by reading what is his error, and how great his impiety. ... Go, live so; it cannot be that the son of those tears will perish."

While his mother was praying for him, Augustine was coming under the powerful preaching of Ambrose in Milan. Concerning him Augustine said, "I was led to him unknowingly by God, that I might knowingly be led to God by him." The main verse that was on the lips of Ambrose in those days was 2 Corinthians 3:6, "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." This made a deep impression upon Augustine.

At this juncture in his life, he was also deeply touched by hearing the testimony of Victorinus, a teacher of rhetoric whom Augustine admired. Victorinus had found Christ and taken a bold stand to forsake the ways of the world. A friend of Augustine related Victorinus's testimony to him, upon which Augustine said,

I burned to imitate him. . . . He appeared to me not so much brave as happy, because he had discovered an opportunity of waiting on You only. For this was what I was longing for, thus bound, not

with the irons of another, but my own iron will. The enemy held fast my will, and had made of it a chain, and had bound me tight with it. For out of the perverse will was lust made, and lust indulged in became habit, and habit not resisted became necessity. By these links, as it were, joined together (which is why I called it a ‘chain’), a hard bondage held me enthralled...made strong by long indulgence. ¹

It was in this condition of sinful gloom that God came to Augustine through the Word to set him free. His own words, from his confessions to the Lord, bear clear testimony to the grace of God operating in and over him to lead him to the dynamic answer to all of his mother’s tears and prayers:

THUS I WAS SICK and tormented, reproaching myself far more bitterly than was my practice, rolling and writhing in my chain till it should be utterly broken. By now I was held but slightly, but still was held. And You, O Lord, pressed upon me in my inmost heart with a severe mercy, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame, so that I should not again give way, and that same slender remaining tie not be broken off, but recover strength and enchain me yet more securely.

I kept saying to myself, “See, let it be done now; let it be done now.” And as I said this I all but came to a firm

decision. I all but did it, yet I did not do it. Yet I did not fall back to my old condition, but stood aside for a moment and drew breath. And I tried again, and was near to reaching the resolve — and nearer still, and then all but touched and grasped it. Yet I still did not quite reach or touch or grasp the goal, because I hesitated to die to death and to live to life. And the worse, to which I had been accustomed, was stronger in me than the better, which I had not tried. And up to the very moment in which I was to become another man, the nearer it approached me, the greater horror did it strike in me. But it did not strike me back, nor turn me aside, but held me in suspense.

It was, in fact, my old mistresses, the very toys of toys, and vanities of vanities, who still enthralled me. They tugged at my fleshly garment and whispered softly, “Are you going to part with us? And from that moment will we never be with you any more? And from that moment will not this or that be forbidden you forever?” What were they suggesting to me in those words “this or that”? What is it that they suggested, O my God? Let Your mercy avert it from the soul of Your servant. What impurities did they suggest! What shame! And now I scarcely heard them, for they were not openly showing themselves and opposing me face to face; but muttering, as it were, behind my back, and furtively plucking at me as I was leaving, trying to make me look back at them. Still they delayed me, so that I hesitated to break loose and

shake myself free from them and leap over to the place to which I was called — for an unruly habit kept saying to me, “Do you think you can live without them?”

But now it said this very faintly; for in the direction I had set my face, and to which I trembled to go, the chaste dignity of continence appeared to me — cheerful but not wanton, honestly alluring me to come and doubt nothing, and extending her holy hands, full of a multitude of good examples — to receive and embrace me. There were there so many young men and maidens, a multitude of youth and every age, grave widows and ancient virgins; and continence herself in their midst: not barren, but a fruitful mother of children of joys — by You, O Lord, her Husband. And she smiled on me with a challenging smile, as if to say, “Can you not do what these young men and maidens can? Or can any of them do it of themselves, and not rather in the Lord their God? The Lord their God gave me to them. Why do you stand in your own strength, and thus do not stand? Cast yourself on Him; fear not, He will not flinch and you will not fall. Cast yourself on Him without fear, for He will receive and heal you.” And I blushed violently, for I still heard the muttering of those toys, and hung in suspense. Again she seemed to say, “Shut up your ears against those unclean members of yours upon the earth, that they may be mortified. They tell you of delights, but not according to the law of the Lord Your God” (Col. 3:5;

Psa. 119:85). This struggle raging in my heart was nothing but the contest of self against self. But Alypius [my dear friend], sitting close by my side, awaited in silence the outcome of my extraordinary agitation.

Now when deep reflection had drawn up out of the secret depths of my soul all my misery and had heaped it up before the sight of my heart, there arose a mighty storm, accompanied by a mighty rain of tears. That I might give way fully to my tears and lamentations, I stole away from Alypius; for it seemed to me that solitude was more appropriate for the business of weeping. I went far enough away that I could feel that even his presence was no restraint upon me. This was the way I felt at the time, and he realized it. I suppose I had said something before I rose up, and he noticed that the sound of my voice was choked with weeping. And so he stayed alone, where we had been sitting together, greatly astonished. I flung myself down under a fig tree — how I know not — and gave free course to my tears, and the streams of my eyes gushed out, an acceptable sacrifice to You (1 Pet. 2:5). And, not indeed in these words, but to this effect, I cried to YOU, “But YOU, O LORD — how long? How long, O LORD? Will YOU be angry forever? Oh, remember not against us our former iniquities” (Psa. 6:3; 79:5, 8); for I felt that I was still enthralled by them. I sent up these sorrowful cries: “How long, how long? Tomorrow, and tomorrow? Why not now? Why is there not this very

hour an end to my uncleanness?”

I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when suddenly I heard the voice as of a boy or girl, I know not which, coming from a neighboring house, chanting over and over again, “Take up and read; take up and read.” Immediately I ceased weeping and began most earnestly to think whether it was usual for children in some kind of game to sing such a song, but I could not remember ever having heard the like. So, restraining the torrent of my tears, I rose to my feet, for I could not but think that this was a divine command to open the Bible and read the first passage I should light upon. For I had heard of Antony, that, accidentally coming in while the gospel was being read, he received the admonition as if what was read were addressed to him: “Go and sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come and follow Me” (Matt. 19:21). By such an oracle he was immediately converted to You.

So I quickly returned to the bench where Alypius was sitting, for there I had put down the volume of the apostles when I had left there. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in fornication and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:13-14). I wanted to

read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused into my heart something like the light of full certainty, and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.

Closing the book, then, and putting either my finger or something else for a mark, I began — now with a tranquil countenance — to make it known to Alypius. And he in turn disclosed to me what had been going on in himself, of which I knew nothing. He asked to see what I had read. I showed him, and he looked on even further than I had read. I had not known what followed. But indeed it was this: “Him that is weak in the faith, receive” (Rom. 14:1). This he applied to himself, and told me so. By these words of warning he was strengthened, and by exercising his good resolution and purpose — all very much in keeping with his character, in which, in these respects, he was always far different from and better than I — he joined me in full commitment without any restless hesitation.

Then we went in to my mother, and told her what happened, to her great joy. We explained to her how it had occurred — and she leaped for joy triumphant; and she blessed You, who are “able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.” For she perceived You to have given her far more than she had ever asked for in all her pitiful and most doleful groanings. For You did so convert me to Yourself that I sought neither a wife

nor any other of this world's hopes — standing in that rule of faith which, so many years before, You had shown her in her vision about me. And You did turn her grief into a gladness (Psa. 30:11), much more plentiful than she had ventured to desire, and much dearer and purer than the desire she used to cherish of having grandchildren of my flesh.²



Like Augustine, you may be struggling with a sinful life. You may even be, right now, in the middle of hearing two voices speaking within you. One says, “Open to Christ now,” but the other says, “No, not now, wait for another day.” You should realize that the Bible speaks of these kinds of ambivalent feelings in people who are on the brink of receiving Christ. In Acts 26:14 the Lord identified for Paul his confused feelings by saying, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” Addressing this very conflict, 2 Corinthians 6:2 declares, “Behold, *now* is the acceptable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation.”

It is not a matter of waiting for another day, thinking that *you* have to clean up *your* life before you can come to Christ. Just as you are this moment, in the midst of fightings without and fears within, Christ will come into you, and not only forgive you, but change you from within and give you a new heart.

This new heart is seen in the life of Augustine immediately after he found the Lord. The English minister, F. B. Meyer, tells one of his favorite stories related to the instant change in Augustine's life:

Augustine was swept as by a mighty current between two women, his mother, Monica, a saintly woman, and another woman, who had fascinated him almost to damnation. His life hovered between these two just as your life hovers between Christ and Satan. Sometimes Monica attracted him heavenward, and then the evil influence of this woman dragged him to the very pit of the abyss. The conflict was long and terrible, and Augustine was like a chip upon the tide, swept backward and forward.³

But when the Lord shined into Augustine's heart through the words in Romans 13:14 — "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ" — everything changed. F. B. Meyer continues to describe what happened to Augustine:

Instantly he arose. He had made his decision. He had counted the cost. He told his friend (Alypius), and they went and told Monica, and Monica was glad.

The next day he went down the main street of Carthage. As he did so, he met the woman who had been the fascination of his soul for evil. As he met her, she said:

"Augustine, it is I!"

He said, “But, it is not I,” and passed her and was saved. ⁴

Ambrose relates the same story in one of his writings, giving a few more details of Augustine’s encounter with his former mistress:

...One day meeting his old favorite and not speaking to her, she, being surprised and supposing that he had not recognized her, said, when they met again, “It is I.” “But,” was his answer, “I am not the former I.” ⁵

By opening up to Christ, your “old I” will become a “new I,” and you can say with Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

