

Historical Theology

Aurelius Augustine of Hippo

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Last week Pastor Scott introduced Augustine of Hippo, also known as Saint Augustine, to us. This week I want to fill in some of the details of Augustine's life.

"Augustine is one of the precious few ancient figures who recorded a great deal of information about their life and times. In fact, he is one of very few historical figures to have written an autobiography, a genre that until recent centuries was rarely seen. In his *Confessions*, a spiritual autobiography chronicling his adventurous journey to salvation, Augustine offers historians a detailed account of his life and experiences up to his conversion."

(<https://religionfacts.com/augustine>)

Augustine was born on November 13, 354 in Thagaste (modern-day Algeria in North Africa) and he died on August 28, 430 in Hippo (also in modern-day Algeria). He was born Aurelius Augustine to a pagan father, Patricius, and Monica (331-87), a devout Christian mother and wife, "whose constant prayer for her husband's conversion was eventually answered" (Gonzalez, 241) "in 370, the year before he died, when Augustine was sixteen" and Augustine's conversion, "in late August, 386 when he was almost thirty-two years old." (Piper, 46)

John Piper, in his biography of Augustine, writes, "From this platform in North Africa, and through his

remarkable faithfulness in formulating and defending the Christian faith for his generation, Augustine shaped the history of the Christian church. His influence in the Western world is simply staggering. (Piper, 43)

"Many Western Christians regard Augustine as the greatest theologian to arise in the Church since the apostle Paul." (Needham, 268)

"The most remarkable thing about Augustine's influence is the fact that it flows into radically opposing religious movements. He is cherished as one of the greatest fathers of the Roman Catholic Church, and yet it was Augustine who 'gave us the Reformation'—not only because 'Luther was an Augustinian monk, or that Calvin quoted Augustine more than any other theologian...[but because] the Reformation witnessed the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over the legacy of the Pelagian view of man." (Piper, 43-44)

At age seventeen he went to Carthage to study rhetoric. It was during this time that "he took a concubine and lived with this same woman for fifteen years and had one son by her, Adeodatus." (Ibid. 47)

"When he was nineteen, in the cauldron of Carthage, swollen with conceit and utterly given over to sexual pleasures,

he read Cicero's *Hortensius*, which for the first time arrested by its content and not its rhetorical form. Hortensius exalted the quest for wisdom and truth above mere physical pleasure....This was nine years before his conversion to Christ, but it was utterly significant in redirecting his reading and thinking more toward truth rather than style...." (Ibid. 48)

"For the next nine years he was enamored by the dualistic teaching called Manichaeism, until he became disillusioned with one of its leaders when he was twenty-eight years old. In his twenty-ninth year he moved from Carthage to Rome to teach, but was so fed up with the behavior of the students that he moved to a teaching post in Milan, Italy in 384. This was providential in several ways. There he discovered the Platonists, and there he would meet the great bishop Ambrose." (Ibid. 48-49)

"In early 386, he discovered the writings of Plotinus, a Neoplatonist." (Ibid. 49)

"Alongside Augustine's conversion to Neoplatonism, he fell under the influence of bishop Ambrose of Milan." (Needham 269)

"Augustine was soon convinced in his mind that the Christian faith was true. However, he had a fierce struggle submitting to it in his heart and will; the attractions of the world and sensual pleasures were still overpoweringly strong. His conversion finally came when he was meditating in a garden in Milan in 386. Augustine heard a child's voice mysteriously saying, 'Take and read! Take and read!' He had a copy of the New Testament with him, so he

picked it up and it fell open at Romans 13:13-14: 'Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and lust, not in strife and jealousy. But instead cloth yourself in the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for your sinful nature, to gratify its desires.' In his autobiography, Augustine said: 'I did not want or need to read any further. Instantly, as I finished the sentence, the light of faith flooded into my heart, and all the darkness of doubt vanished.'" (Ibid. 270-71)

Augustine's son, Adeodatus was converted soon after this, and Ambrose of Milan baptized both Augustine and Adeodatus on Easter Sunday in 387. (Ibid 271) That same year Monica died and in 389 Adeodatus died

"In 391 became a priest of Hippo. He spent his early clerical career in study, contending against the Manichees, completing *On Free Will*, and battling the Donatists."

(<https://religionfacts.com/augustine>)

In 395 he reluctantly became bishop of Hippo. "He took on a remarkable amount of duties. In addition to the regular tasks of administering the sacraments, visiting the afflicted, preaching, judging disputes, and helping the needy, he wrote an extraordinary amount and engaged in several heated controversies. Augustine was intimately involved in three major controversies: Manichaeism, Donatism, and Pelagianism. (Ibid.)

"Augustine died in 430, while Hippo was under siege from an invading Germanic army of Vandals." (Needham 283)

Three of Augustine's most influential books are *Confessions*, *On the Trinity*, and *City of God*.

Confessions. This is the autobiography of Augustine that is written as a prayer to God. It is also "accorded the position of the first autobiography in history."
(<https://religionfacts.com/augustine>)

On the Trinity. As one might gather this book contains Augustine's influential thoughts on the Trinity.

City of God. "Augustine wrote this after the Visigoths captured Rome in 410. Pagans blamed the disaster on the fact that Rome had abandoned its traditional gods. Responding to this charge Augustine developed a Christian view of world-history. The human race, he said, had always been divided into two spiritual communities: the "city of the world", made up of those who were controlled by a supreme love of self and earthly things; and the "city of God", made up of those who were controlled by a supreme love of God and eternal things. The two cities were mingled with each other here on earth, but they would be finally separated into their opposite destinies when Christ returned.
(Needham 282-83)

Quotes:

"You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you."
(Confessions, Chadwick, Book I., Chapter 1. p.3)

"I had entreated chastity of thee and had prayed, "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet." For I was afraid

lest thou shouldst hear me too soon, and too soon cure me of my disease of lust which I desired to have satisfied rather than extinguished." (Book 8, Chapter 7, p. 139)
([https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Confessions_\(Augustine\)](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Confessions_(Augustine)))

"How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose....You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure, though not to flesh and blood, you who outshine all light, yet are hidden deeper than any secret in our hearts, you who surpass all honor, though not in the eyes of men who see all honor in themselves... O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation." (Augustine, Confessions, Book IX, Chapter 1; quoted by Piper, 40)

Resources:

Saint Augustine's Confessions: A New Translation by Henry Chadwick. Oxford World Classics. Oxford University Press, 2008.

St. Augustine of Hippo.
<https://religionfacts.com/augustine>

Justo L. Gonzalez. The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1. HarperCollins Publishers, 2010.

Nick Needham. 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Vol. 1. Christian Focus Publications, 2016.

John Piper. The Legacy of Sovereign Joy. Crossway Books, 2000.

