

## Augustine Reading

### Introduction to the Reading

Augustine of Hippo wrote his *Confessions* between 397 -400 CE. In it he gives an autobiographical account of his whole life up through his conversion to Christianity. In Book 2, excerpted here, he thinks over the passions and temptations of his youth, especially during a period where he had to come home from where he was studying and return to living with his parents. His mother Monica was already Christian and his father was considering it. They want him to be academically successful and become a great orator.

### Augustine, selections from *Confessions* (Trans. Caroline J-B Hammond, 2014)

(1) I wish to put on record the disgusting deeds in which I engaged, and the corrupting effect of sensual experience on my soul, not because I love them, but so that I may love you, my God. I do this because of my love for your love, to the end that—as I recall my wicked, wicked ways in the bitterness of recollection—you may grow even sweeter to me. For you are a sweetness which does not deceive, a sweetness which brings happiness and peace, pulling me back together from the disintegration in which I was being shattered and torn apart, when I turned away from you who are unity and dispersed into the multiplicity that is oblivion. For there was a time during my adolescence when I burned to have my fill of hell. I ran wild and reckless in all manner of shady liaisons, and my outward appearance deteriorated, and I degenerated before your eyes as I went on pleasing myself and desiring to appear pleasing in human sight.

(2) What was it that used to delight me, if not loving and being loved? But there was no boundary maintained between one mind and another, and reaching only as far as the clear confines of friendship. Instead the slime of fleshly desire and the spurts of adolescence belched out their fumes, and these clouded and obscured my heart, so that it was impossible to distinguish the purity of love from the darkness of lust. Both of them together seethed in me, dragging my immaturity over the heights of bodily desire, and plunging me down into a whirlpool of sin. Your anger grew strong against me, but I was unaware of it. I had been deafened by the loud grinding of the chain of my mortality, the punishment for the pride of my soul, and I went even further away from you, and you let me. I was shaken about and poured away and spilled out and burned up by my sexual immorality; and you said nothing. How long you took, my Joy! You were silent then, and I wandered far, so far, from you, toward more and more sterile seeds, whose only fruit was grief, in my proud despondency and restless lethargy.

(3) Who would bring order to my predicament? Who would turn the fleeting attractions of these most recent experiences to a proper purpose and fix limits to their luscious taste, to make the foaming waves of my youth surge toward the safe haven of marriage? If I were unable to find contentment in such experiences by being confined to the procreation of children (this is what your law prescribes, Lord, for you also cultivate the offshoots of our mortality, and in your power you set your gentle hand to keeping in check the thorns which you excluded from your paradise—for your omnipotence is not far from us, even when we are far from you)—or I would surely have taken more notice of the sound from your clouds, “Such as are married will

experience the troubles of the flesh: but I am sparing you," and, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman"; and, "He who has no wife thinks upon the things of God, how to please God; he who is joined in matrimony thinks upon worldly things, how to please his wife." I should have paid more careful attention to these voices, and if I had become a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of the heavens I would now be anticipating your embraces with more pleasure.

(4) I was in a pitiful state of turmoil, abandoning you to follow the impulse of my own moral weakness. I transgressed all your true ordinances, but I did not escape your scourges. What mortal ever can? After all, you were always there, merciful even in your severity, sprinkling all my forbidden pleasures with the bitterest of disappointments, so that I would seek a kind of pleasure that is free from disappointment, and when I did so I would find none other but yourself, Lord, yourself alone. You shape pain into precepts, and you strike us to heal us, and you put us to death so that we do not die apart from you. Where was I? And how far was I in exile from the pleasures of your house in that sixteenth year of my mortal age, when the madness of lust seized dominion over me (and I surrendered myself to it completely)? Such passion was permissible by human standards, disgraceful as they are: but it is forbidden by your laws. Not that my family was concerned to rescue me from ruin by marrying me off—their only concern was for me to master oratory and rhetoric as thoroughly as possible.

(5) In that year, there was a break in my studies. I was brought back from Madauri, the nearby town where I had now begun to lodge in order to study literature and oratory. My father, with more temerity than wealth, was saving up to pay for me to stay at Carthage in the longer term, for even though he was a citizen and councilor at Thagaste, he was a man of modest means. Who am I telling this? Certainly not you, my God! But I am narrating this story in your presence to my kind, to the whole human race, whatever tiny fraction of it happens to come across these writings of mine. And why is this? Obviously so that I, and whoever reads this, may ponder the depths from which we must cry out to you. What is closer to your ears than a heart that makes its confession to you and a life that is faithful?

Who was there, back then, who did not praise that man, my father, because he was spending on his son whatever he must, even beyond his means, so that his son could travel far away in order to pursue his studies? Many citizens, far richer than he, took less trouble than this for their children: although in the meantime this same father was not at all troubled about what kind of person I grew up to become before you, or whether I was chaste. So long as I was well-spoken, so what if I was estranged from worshipping you, O God?—though you are the one true Master over your field which is my heart.

(6) In my sixteenth year I found myself obliged to be at leisure, for funds at home were low, and I had a break from all this education and started living with my parents. Thorny growths of sexual immorality sprouted up higher than my head, and there was no hand to uproot them. Rather, when we were at the baths my father saw that I was becoming a man and clothed with the turbulence of adolescence; he was delighted by this, at the prospect of grandchildren. In his pleasure he told my mother. It was a pleasure fueled by wine, which is the way this world has forgotten you, its creator, and loved—instead of you—creation; and all because of the invisible wine of its own will, which is perverse and inclined toward everything base.

[Augustine's mother Monica, a Christian, was worried about his morals] . . .

**(7)** Pity me! How do I even dare to say that you were silent, my God, when I was the one withdrawing from you? Were you really so silent toward me then? Whose words were they if not yours that you chanted into my ears through my mother, who was your faithful servant! From that age on, nothing penetrated my heart deeply enough to spur me to act upon it. My mother's wish (and I recall how in great distress she warned me privately about it) was that I should not commit fornication or, still worse, adultery with a woman who was married. This seemed to me to be mere women's nagging; it would be embarrassing to pay heed to it. But they were warnings from you, and I had no idea of it. I went on believing that you were saying nothing. I thought she was the one speaking, though all the time it was you speaking to me through her. So in rejecting her I was rejecting you—I who was her son, I who was the son of your handmaid, and your servant.

But I knew none of this. I rushed headlong so blindly that among friends of my own age I blushed over the slightest loss of prestige, for I would hear them boasting of their own scandalous deeds. The more discreditable the deeds, the more they bragged about them. So I began to take pleasure in such behavior not just because of the lust of the deed itself but also because of the kudos it won me. What is more deserving of disapproval than depravity? I faked the depravity to avoid the disapproval of my peers. If no actual wrongdoing took place that I could boast of to equal my peers in their abandon, I pretended to have done something wrong, though really I had not. I did not want my innocence to resemble weakness nor did I want to be scorned because of my sexual inexperience.

[Augustine's mother Monica worries about him] . . . Now she began to realize that it was already unhealthy and potentially a future danger too; something to restrain within the bounds of a marital relationship if it could not be pruned back to the quick. The reason why she did not take it more seriously was her fear of damaging my expectations by shackling me to a wife: not, in other words, that hope for the world to come which my mother maintained, but the hope of an academic career, which (as I knew) both my parents were all too eager for. In my father's case, this was because he gave virtually no thought to you and instead thought of my gaining such hollow achievements. My mother, though, thought that such customary academic study would not only be no hindrance but might even be some help in my striving to reach you. At least so I guess, when I recall my parents' behavior as best I can. They gave me a loose rein, rather than an attitude of strict discipline, to indulge my volatility with whatever pleasures took my fancy—in all of which, my God, a mist was cutting me off from the brightness of your truth, while my wickedness was overflowing in its abundance.

**(9)** Your law, Lord, surely punishes theft; and that law is so written in human hearts that not even wrongdoing can efface it. For what thief willingly puts up with a thief, even if one has all he needs while the other is driven by need? I wanted to commit theft, so I did. I was not driven by any kind of lack other than the absence of righteousness and a distaste for it: and the fact that I was bloated with sin. For I stole what I had already in plenty, and of far better quality. I had no desire to enjoy what I had aimed to steal; rather, what I enjoyed was the theft and sin themselves. There was a pear tree near to our vineyard, laden with fruit which had no attractive appearance or flavor. So we set out in the dead of night—a gang of good-for-nothing youths—to shake it down

and carry off its fruit; up till then we had prolonged our sport in the usual vexatious fashion in the streets. We carried off great loads, not for ourselves to eat but for throwing to pigs—though we did eat some of them, on condition that what we were doing was something we enjoyed because it was forbidden.

Look, O God, and see my heart, see my heart! For you had mercy on it even in the depths of the pit. Let my heart tell you now to look upon it: what was it searching for there? And how was it that I became a wrongdoer for nothing, and the cause of my wrongdoing was none other than wrongdoing itself? It was loathsome and I loved it. I was in love with death, I was in love with my own failing—not the thing in which I was failing, but the actual failure itself was what I loved. My soul was foul and, becoming alienated from your firm foundation, it was disintegrating into oblivion. It did not use disgraceful means to achieve what it wanted; what it wanted was the disgrace itself.

**(10)** Certainly beautiful objects have an attraction about them, whether made of gold or silver or the like. Also, the sense of what feels right in the physical act of touching has a powerful influence upon us, while the other senses are all proportionately adapted to particular material objects. Worldly honor and the power to rule and command have their own dignity, and from this the taste for vengeance arises. Yet there should be no escaping from you, Lord, and no turning away from your law, so as to obtain all these things. The life we live here on earth has its own particular attraction, because it possesses its own proper measure of honor and is in balance with all these things that are beautiful on a lower level. Human friendship is also sweetened by a precious bond on account of the unity it forges out of many souls. Yet it is in pursuit of all these things and the like that sin gains an entrance, while an ungoverned inclination for those things, even though they are only the lowest level of goods, means that better and higher ends are abandoned—which is to say you, Lord our God, and your truth and your law. For even these lowly things bring with them pleasures, but not like my God, who has made everything; because the righteous shall rejoice in the Lord, and he himself is the delight of those who are true of heart. . . . .

**(12)** I was pathetic! What was it that I loved about you, my theft, my deed of darkness done in the sixteenth year of my age? For you were not beautiful, because you were an act of theft. Then again, should I be addressing you as if you were an actual thing? The fruit we stole was beautiful because it was your creation, O most beautiful of all, creator of all, good God, God the supreme good, and my true good. Yes, the fruit was beautiful, but my pitiable soul did not desire the actual fruit. I had plenty of better fruit—I plucked these only for the sake of thieving. For I threw away what I had stolen. All that I feasted on from my theft was my own wickedness, and I was delighted to enjoy it. Even if one morsel of fruit passed my lips, it was sin that sweetened it. Now, O Lord my God, I want to work out what it was about the theft that gave me pleasure. Look—it does not have a fine appearance. I do not mean in the same way as justice and wisdom, or indeed like human intelligence and memory, nor physical senses and organic growth; neither is it beautiful in appearance and shining like the stars in their courses, and the earth and the sea teeming with new life being born and replacing what falls into decay. My act of theft is not even like those deceiving vices that have a specious, shady illusion of beauty.

**(14)** . . . So what was it about the theft that gave me pleasure, and in which I imitated my Lord, albeit in a wicked and perverse way? Was it pleasing to contravene your law at least surreptitiously because I was not able to do so in an authoritative way? Was it that I myself was like a captive, imitating a maimed kind of freedom by doing what was forbidden without being punished, in a shadowy semblance of your omnipotence? Just look at me—that slave fleeing from his own master, and pursuing a fantasy! What rotten filth! What a deformity of life, what an abyss of death! Was it possible to take pleasure in something just because it was forbidden, and for no other reason than that it was forbidden?

**(15)** How shall I make restitution to the Lord for the fact that my memory recalls these things and yet my soul is not afraid because of them? I will love you, Lord, and give thanks, and confess praises to your name because you have forgiven me my sins and all my wrongdoing. . .

**(16)** What fruit did I obtain back then, wretch that I was, amid those actions which I now blush to remember—particularly that theft in which I enjoyed nothing else but the actual thieving, both because it too was a nothing and because it made me even more wretched! For had I been alone I would not have done it (I remember thinking so at the time), yes, I would definitely not have done it alone. So what I loved about it was participating with others in doing what I did. Did I not love anything, then, apart from the theft? Surely I loved nothing else, because that participation was not something real. What was it, in actual fact? Who is it who can teach me, except the one who illuminates my heart and penetrates its shadows? What is this thing that has come into my mind to seek out, and investigate, and weigh up? Because if then I loved those fruits that I had stolen and was longing to enjoy them, I could have done it alone. If it was enough to commit that sin by which I achieved my pleasure, I would not have had to kindle the itch of my greedy desire through the stimulus of complicit consciences. Because my pleasure was not in the pears, it was in the actual crime that a fellowship of sinners committed together.

**(17)** What were my thoughts and feelings? Certainly they were self-evidently shameful, and augured ill for me as I maintained them. But still, what actually were they? Who understands their faults? It was for a laugh, to give us a bit of a thrill, at the thought of cheating people who had no idea we were capable of such behavior and who would strongly disapprove. So why did I get pleasure from something that I would not have done at all if left to myself? Is it perhaps because no one finds it easy to laugh when alone? It is a fact that no one finds it easy, but even so laughter sometimes overcomes people when no one else is present, and they are solitary and alone, if something overwhelmingly silly impacts upon their senses or thoughts. Yet on my own I would never have done it, no, I definitely would not have done it on my own.

O my God, see the living memory of my soul in your presence! I would not have committed that theft on my own, a theft in which it was not the stolen items that pleased me but the very act of thieving. It definitely would not have pleased me to do it alone, nor would I have done it. What an extremely alien alliance it was—an unsearchable distraction of the mind! Out of a game and a lark came an eagerness to do harm, a taste for inflicting losses on others without myself gaining anything, or enjoying settling a score. Once someone says, “Come on, let’s do it,” it is shameful to be anything but shameless.

**(18)** Who is going to untie that tangled, twisted mass of knots? How vile it is—I have no desire to turn my attention to it, I have no desire even to look upon it. I desire you—O Righteousness and Integrity, both lovely and becoming to the gaze that is true, with an appetite that can never cloy. With you there is deep peace and life which cannot be disturbed. Those who enter into you enter into the joy of their Lord and will not be afraid, and will abide perfectly in the One who is perfect. I deviated from you, I have wandered from the path, my God; in my teens I was too inconstant in your steadfastness, and I made myself into a barren land.