

AUGUSTINE: CONFESSIONS

A Guided Tour of Overcoming a Besetting Sin

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Augustine's *Confessions* is his written testimony of salvation being recounted to God. This excerpt is taken as he recounts how God delivered him from sexual sin. It picks up in the middle of Book 8. Augustine has just finished recounting how the conversion of a man named Victorinus (an influential and intelligent man like Augustine) played a role in his coming to faith. Simplicianus is a friend who is talking with Augustine and has just finished telling him of the conversion of Victorinus.

The blocked texts in this article are meant to guide you in a personal reflection during your reading of Augustine's struggle with sexual sin. It is hoped that whatever sin (life-dominating or otherwise) you are struggling with, this article will encourage and instruct you. It is not being proposed that Augustine's story is *the* model for everyone, but merely that Augustine is vividly honest about his struggle and, in doing so, illustrates many excellent truths of Scripture about how people change.

Only minor changes have been made to the original text as translated by Albert Outler. (1) Old English words were exchanged for their modern equivalents – "didst" changed to "did." (2) Scripture references were added into the text instead of being given as endnotes. (3) Chapter subtitles were added to help the reader pick up in the middle of Augustine's book. (4) Bold face emphasis was added in several places to highlight aspects of the writing particularly applicable to the purpose of this article.

BOOK EIGHT: CHAPTER V

"Augustine Defines His Battle with Sin"

Now when this man of Yours, Simplicianus, told me the story of Victorinus, I was eager to imitate him. Indeed, this was Simplicianus' purpose in telling it to me. But when he went on to tell how, in the reign of the Emperor Julian, there was a law passed by which Christians were forbidden to teach literature and rhetoric; and how Victorinus, in ready obedience to the law, chose to abandon his "school of words" rather than Your Word, by which You make eloquent the tongues of the dumb—he appeared to me not so much brave as happy, because he had found a reason for giving his time wholly to You. For this was what I was longing to do; but as

yet I was bound by the iron chain of my own 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 came lust, and the service of lust ended in habit, and habit, not resisted, became necessity. By these links, as it were, forged together—which is why I called it "a chain"—a hard bondage held me in slavery.** But that new will which had begun to spring up in me freely to worship You and to enjoy You, O my God, the only certain Joy, was not able as yet to overcome my former willfulness, made strong by long indulgence. Thus my two wills—the old and the new, the carnal and the spiritual—were in conflict within me; and by their discord they tore my soul apart.

Thus I came to understand from my own experience what I had read, how "the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh." (Gal 5:17) I truly lusted both ways, yet more in that which I approved in myself than in that which I disapproved in myself. For in the latter it was not now really I that was involved, because here I was rather an unwilling sufferer than a willing actor. **And yet it was through me that habit had become an armed enemy against me, because I had willingly come to be what I unwillingly found myself to be.**

Throughout this piece of Augustine's *Confessions* the theme of the old and new nature will be repeated and examined many times. It might be helpful for the reader to review the key New Testament passages that discuss these concepts (Rom 6-8; Eph 4:21-32; Col 3:1-4; I Pet 2:11-12).

From this we see that sin is more than "a bad choice." Sin is a part of our nature made stronger by our history (both indulgence and suffering). Our sin is made strong by our history (therefore we bear responsibility and experience guilt), but as Christians our sin is no longer our identity (therefore we need not wallow in shame or view sin as our inevitable destiny).

Application: Our goal is not merely to make better choices, but to strengthen the new nature and weaken the old nature. In a war a general should not be consumed with merely winning every battle. The goal is to win the war. The strategy and maneuvers made during "neutral" times go a long way towards strengthening our position and weakening theirs. Our battle with sin can be both arm wrestling and chess match.

Who, then, can with any justice speak against it, when just punishment follows the sinner? I had now no longer my accustomed excuse that, as yet, I hesitated to forsake the world and serve You because my perception of the truth was uncertain. For now it was certain. But, still bound to the earth, **I refused to be Your soldier; and was as much afraid of being freed from all entanglements as we ought to fear to be entangled.**

Thus with the baggage of the world I was sweetly burdened, as one in slumber, and my musings on thee were like the efforts of those who desire to awake, but who are still overpowered with drowsiness and fall back into deep slumber. And as no one wishes to

sleep forever (for all men rightly count waking better)--yet a man will usually defer shaking off his drowsiness when there is a heavy lethargy in his limbs; and he is glad to sleep on even when his reason disapproves, and the hour for rising has struck—so was I assured that it was much better for me to give myself up to Your love than to go on yielding myself to my own lust. Thy love satisfied and vanquished me; my lust pleased and fettered me. I had no answer to Your calling to me, "Awake, you who sleep, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light." (Eph 5:14) On all sides, thou did show me that thy words are true, and I, convicted by the truth, had nothing at all to reply but the drawling and drowsy words: "Presently; see, presently. Leave me alone a little while." But "presently, presently," had no present; and my "leave me alone a little while" went on for a long while. In vain did I "delight in Your law in the inner man" while "another law in my members warred against the law of my mind and brought me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members." **For the law of sin is the tyranny of habit, by which the mind is drawn and held, even against its will. Yet it deserves to be so held because it so willingly falls into the habit.** "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death" but thy grace alone, through Jesus Christ our Lord? (Rom 7:22-25)

Augustine could see that in his battle with lust there was a clear choice between God's love and his self-destruction, but like one who knows he needs to get out of bed to get to work, he chooses to hit the "moral snooze button." Strangely, he feared the freedom God offered more than the slavery to his sin.

Application: Put the foolishness of your sin into words. In the moment sin's lies make sense to us. Our goal in putting those lies and empty promises into words is not shame, but to allow ourselves to more effectively "take every thought captive to obey Christ" and thereby "destroy stronghold [and] arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God (II Cor 9:4-6).

Image: As you write out the foolishness of your sin, imagine setting a voice recording on your alarm clock that says, "It is time to get up. If you don't get out of bed now you will lose \$500 and be unable to pay your mortgage. It's not worth it, so get up."

CHAPTER VI

"Augustine Remembers Key People"

And now I will tell and confess unto Your name, O Lord, my Helper and my Redeemer, how You did deliver me from the chain of sexual desire by which I was so tightly held, and from the slavery of worldly business. With increasing anxiety I was going about my usual affairs, and daily sighing to You. I attended Your church as frequently as my business, under the burden of which I groaned, left me free to do so. Alypius was with me, disengaged at last from his legal post, after a third term as assessor, and now waiting for private clients to whom he might sell his legal advice as I sold the power of speaking (as if it could be supplied by teaching). But

Nebridius had consented, for the sake of our friendship, to teach under Verecundus--a citizen of Milan and professor of grammar, and a very intimate friend of us all—who ardently desired, and by right of friendship demanded from us, the faithful aid he greatly needed. Nebridius was not drawn to this by any desire of gain--for he could have made much more out of his learning had he been so inclined--but as he was a most sweet and kindly friend, he was unwilling, out of respect for the duties of friendship, to slight our request. But in this he acted very discreetly, taking care not to become known to those persons who had great reputations in the world. Thus he avoided all distractions of mind, and reserved as many hours as possible to pursue or read or listen to discussions about wisdom.

On a certain day, then, when Nebridius was away--for some reason I cannot remember--there came to visit Alypius and me at our house one Ponticianus, a fellow countryman of ours from Africa, who held high office in the emperor's court. What he wanted with us I do not know; but we sat down to talk together, and it chanced that he noticed a book on a game table before us. He took it up, opened it, and, contrary to his expectation, found it to be the apostle Paul, for he imagined that it was one of my wearisome rhetoric textbooks. At this, he looked up at me with a smile and expressed his delight and wonder that he had so unexpectedly found this book and only this one, lying before my eyes; for he was indeed a Christian and a faithful one at that, and often he prostrated himself before You, our God, in the church in constant daily prayer. When I had told him that I had given much attention to these writings, a conversation followed in which he spoke of Anthony, the Egyptian monk, whose name was in high repute among Your servants, although up to that time not familiar to me. When he learned this, he lingered on the topic, giving us an account of this eminent man, and marveling at our ignorance. We in turn were amazed to hear of Your wonderful works so fully manifested in recent times—almost in our own—occurring in the true faith and the Catholic Church. We all wondered—we, that these things were so great, and he, that we had never heard of them.

From this, his conversation turned to the multitudes in the monasteries and their manners so fragrant to You, and to the teeming solitudes of the wilderness, of which we knew nothing at all. There was even a monastery at Milan, outside the city's walls, full of good brothers under the fostering care of Ambrose—and we were ignorant of it. He went on with his story, and we listened intently and in silence. He then told us how, on a certain afternoon, at Trier, when the emperor was occupied watching the gladiatorial games, he and three comrades went out for a walk in the gardens close to the city walls. There, as they chanced to walk two by two, one strolled away with him, while the other two went on by themselves. As they rambled, these first two came upon a certain cottage where lived some of Your servants, some of the "poor in spirit" ("of such is the Kingdom of Heaven"), where they found the book in which was written the life of Anthony! One of them began to read it, to marvel and to be inflamed by it. While reading, he meditated on embracing just such a life, giving up his worldly employment to seek thee alone. These two belonged to the group of officials called "secret service agents." Then, suddenly being overwhelmed with a holy love and a sober shame and as if in anger with himself, he fixed his eyes on his friend, exclaiming: "Tell me, I beg you, **what goal are we seeking in all these toils of ours? What is it that we desire? What is our motive in public service? Can our hopes in the court rise higher than to be friends of the emperor'? But**

how frail, how beset with peril, is that pride! Through what dangers must we climb to a greater danger? And when shall we succeed? **But if I chose to become a friend of God, see, I can become one now.**" Thus he spoke, and in the pangs of the travail of the new life he turned his eyes again onto the page and continued reading; he was inwardly changed, as You did see, and the world dropped away from his mind, as soon became plain to others. For as he read with a heart like a stormy sea, more than once he groaned. Finally he saw the better course, and resolved on it. Then, having become Your servant, he said to his friend: "Now I have broken loose from those hopes we had, and I am determined to serve God; and I enter into that service from this hour in this place. If you are reluctant to imitate me, do not oppose me." The other replied that he would continue bound in his friendship, to share in so great a service for so great a prize. So both became Yours, and began to "build a tower", counting the cost—namely, of forsaking all that they had and following You. (cf. Luke 14:28-33) Shortly after, Ponticianus and his companion, who had walked with him in the other part of the garden, came in search of them to the same place, and having found them reminded them to return, as the day was declining. But the first two, making known to Ponticianus their resolution and purpose, and how a resolve had sprung up and become confirmed in them, entreated them not to take it ill if they refused to join themselves with them. But Ponticianus and his friend, although not changed from their former course, did nevertheless (as he told us) bewail themselves and congratulated their friends on their godliness, recommending themselves to their prayers. And with hearts inclining again toward earthly things, they returned to the palace. But the other two, setting their affections on heavenly things, remained in the cottage. Both of them had affianced brides who, when they heard of this, likewise dedicated their virginity to You.

As Augustine was being prepared by God to break free from his besetting sin of lust, Augustine was challenged by the faithfulness and sacrifice of fellow Christians. Strangely, none of these fellow Christians by whom Augustine was challenged (by example or testimony) shared his same struggle with sexual desires (II Cor 1:3-5). Yet Augustine could see in their life a model of the universal human struggle to die to self and live for God (Luke 9:23-26).

Application: Make a list of people you know who model faithfulness and sacrifice in their walk with Christ. As you reflect on their life, realize they are cut from the same human cloth as you are. It takes the same grace of God for them to die to their sinful desires and it is a daily struggle for them as well. If possible, talk with these people about their walk with God. It will make change seem like less of a romantic, all-or-nothing event and give an example that it is possible to rely on God's grace for your daily struggles.

CHAPTER VII

"Augustine Looks at His Sin Again"

Such was the story Ponticianus told. But while he was speaking, You, O Lord, turned me toward myself, taking me from behind my back, where I had put myself while unwilling to

exercise self-scrutiny. And now You did set me face to face with myself, that I might see how ugly I was, and how crooked and sordid, be spotted and ulcerous. And I looked and I loathed myself; but how to fly from myself I could not discover. **And if I sought to turn my gaze away from myself, he would continue his narrative, and You would oppose me to myself and thrust me before my own eyes that I might discover my iniquity and hate it. I had known it, but acted as though I knew it not—I winked at it and forgot it.**

But now, the more ardently I loved those whose wholesome affections I heard reported—that they had given themselves up wholly to You to be cured—the more did I abhor myself when compared with them. For many of my years—perhaps twelve—had passed away since my nineteenth, when, upon the reading of Cicero's Hortensius, I was roused to a desire for wisdom. And here I was, still postponing the abandonment of this world's happiness to devote myself to the search. **For not just the finding alone, but also the bare search for it, ought to have been preferred above the treasures and kingdoms of this world; better than all bodily pleasures, though they were to be had for the taking. But, wretched youth that I was—supremely wretched even in the very outset of my youth—I had entreated Your chastity and had prayed, "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet." For I was afraid lest You should hear me too soon, and too soon cure me of my disease of lust which I desired to have satisfied rather than extinguished.** And I had wandered through perverse ways of godless superstition—not really sure of it, either, but preferring it to the other, which I did not seek in piety, but opposed in malice.

And I had thought that I delayed from day to day in rejecting those worldly hopes and following You alone because there did not appear anything certain by which I could direct my course. And now the day had arrived in which I was laid bare to myself and my conscience was to chide me: "Where are you, O my tongue? You said indeed that you were not willing to cast off the baggage of vanity for uncertain truth. But behold now it is certain, and still that burden oppresses you. At the same time those who have not worn themselves out with searching for it as you have, nor spent ten years and more in thinking about it, have had their shoulders unburdened and have received wings to fly away." Thus was I inwardly confused, and mightily confounded with a horrible shame, while Ponticianus went ahead speaking such things. And when he had finished his story and the business he came for, he went his way. And then what did I not say to myself, within myself? With what scourges of rebuke did I not lash my soul to make it follow me, as I was struggling to go after thee? Yet it drew back. It refused. It would not make an effort. All its arguments were exhausted and confuted. Yet it resisted in sullen disquiet, fearing the cutting off of that habit by which it was being wasted to death, as if that were death itself.

Augustine realized he must face his own sin and sinfulness. It was not his habit to consistently acknowledge his battle with sin. His mind and will resisted seeing what was so obvious. Yet in this process of change he began to view God's continued conviction as evidence of God's love and grace. God was not giving up on him.

Application: Admit that you are pursuing death in the name of life. Until you admit, you will try to find a way to make your sin "work." Call your sin by its true name – the way of death and destruction (Prov 14:12; 16:25). Let the utter folly of your repeated choices force you to cry out for God's grace and be willing to follow His Word (as we are about to see in the life of Augustine).

CHAPTER VIII *"Augustine Takes Some Decisive Steps"*

Then, as this vehement quarrel, which I waged with my soul in the chamber of my heart, was raging inside my inner dwelling, agitated both in mind and countenance, I seized upon Alypius and exclaimed: "What is the matter with us? What is this? What did you hear? The uninstructed start up and take heaven, and we—with all our learning but so little heart—see where we wallow in flesh and blood! Because others have gone before us, are we ashamed to follow, and not rather ashamed at our not following?" I scarcely knew what I said, and in my excitement I flung away from him, while he gazed at me in silent astonishment. For I did not sound like myself: my face, eyes, color, tone expressed my meaning more clearly than my words.

There was a little garden belonging to our lodging, of which we had the use—as of the whole house—for the master, our landlord, did not live there. The tempest in my breast hurried me out into this garden, **where no one might interrupt the fiery struggle in which I was engaged with myself, until it came to the outcome that You knew though I did not.** But I was mad for health, and dying for life; knowing what evil thing I was, but not knowing what good thing I was so shortly to become.

I fled into the garden, with Alypius following step by step; **for I had no secret in which he did not share**, and how could he leave me in such distress? We sat down, as far from the house as possible. I was greatly disturbed in spirit, angry at myself with a turbulent indignation because I had not entered Your will and covenant, O my God, while all my bones cried out to me to enter, extolling it to the skies. The way therein is not by ships or chariots or feet—indeed it was not as far as I had come from the house to the place where we were seated. For to go along that road and indeed to reach the goal is nothing else but the will to go. But it must be a strong and single will, not staggering and swaying about this way and that—a changeable, twisting, fluctuating will, wrestling with itself while one part falls as another rises.

Finally, in the very fever of my indecision, I made many motions with my body; like men do when they will to act but cannot, either because they do not have the limbs or because their limbs are bound or weakened by disease, or incapacitated in some other way. Thus if I tore my hair, struck my forehead, or, entwining my fingers, clasped my knee, these I did because I willed it. But I might have willed it and still not have done it, if the nerves had not obeyed my will. Many things then I did, in which the will and power to do were not the same. Yet I did not do that one thing which seemed to me infinitely more desirable, which before long I should have power to will because shortly when I willed, I would will with a single will. For in this, **the power of willing is the power of doing; and as yet I could not do it. Thus my body more readily obeyed the slightest wish of the soul in moving its limbs at the order of my mind than my soul obeyed itself to accomplish in the will alone its great resolve.**

Augustine began to hate his sin more than he loved his own reputation and pride. The result was his complete honesty to a friend and the resolve to let nothing distract him from the work God was doing in his heart. This honesty let him to candidly admit the weakness of his will. Even as man of great celebrity and influence, his reputation and appearance no longer bound him to his sin.

Application: Who do you need to confide in about your battle with sin (Heb 3:12-13)? Decide now that you will contact this person(s). How will you describe your weakness of will? Be prepared to be honest (with notes if necessary) so that emotions or embarrassment do not impede you. What elements of reputation or pride cause you to hesitate from following through on this task? See these as the very chains with which Satan binds your soul and eats away at your life.

CHAPTER IX "Augustine's Enemy Within"

How can there be such a strange anomaly? And why is it? Let Your mercy shine on me, that I may inquire and find an answer, amid the dark labyrinth of human punishment and in the darkest contritions of the sons of Adam. Whence such an anomaly? And why should it be? The mind commands the body, and the body obeys. The mind commands itself and is resisted. The mind commands the hand to be moved and there is such readiness that the command is scarcely distinguished from the obedience in act. Yet the mind is mind, and the hand is body. The mind commands the mind to will, and yet though it be itself it does not obey itself. Whence this strange anomaly and why should it be? I repeat: The will commands itself to will, and could not give the command unless it wills; yet what is commanded is not done. But actually the will does not will entirely; therefore it does not command entirely. For as far as it wills, it commands. And as far as it does not will, the thing commanded is not done. For the will commands that there be an act of will--not another, but itself. **But it does not command entirely. Therefore, what is commanded does not happen; for if the will were whole and**

entire, it would not even command it to be, because it would already be. It is, therefore, no strange anomaly partly to will and partly to be unwilling. This is actually an infirmity of mind, which cannot wholly rise, while pressed down by habit, even though it is supported by the truth. And so there are two wills, because one of them is not whole, and what is present in this one is lacking in the other.

CHAPTER X "Two Wills, But Only One Lord"

Let them perish from Your presence, O God, as vain talkers, and deceivers of the soul perish, who, when they observe that there are two wills in the act of deliberation, go on to affirm that there are two kinds of minds in us: one good, the other evil. They are indeed themselves evil when they hold these evil opinions--and they shall become good only when they come to hold the truth and consent to the truth that thy apostle may say to them: "You were formerly in darkness, but now are you in the light in the Lord." (Eph 5:8) But they desired to be light, not "in the Lord," but in themselves. They conceived the nature of the soul to be the same as what God is, and thus have become a thicker darkness than they were; for in their dread arrogance they have gone farther away from You, from You "the true Light, that lights every man that comes into the world." Mark what you say and blush for shame; draw near to him and be enlightened, and your faces shall not be ashamed. (cf. Ps 34:5)

While I was deliberating whether I would serve the Lord my God now, as I had long purposed to do, **it was I who willed and it was also I who was unwilling. In either case, it was I. I neither willed with my whole will nor was I wholly unwilling. And so I was at war with myself and torn apart by myself.** And this strife was against my will; yet it did not show the presence of another mind, but the punishment of my own. Thus it was no more I who did it, but the sin that dwelt in me—the punishment of a sin freely committed by Adam, and I was a son of Adam.

Augustine does not use the presence/battle of two wills as an excuse for his repeated failures. He recognizes the continued presence and pull of sin in his heart. Yet Augustine also acknowledges that while he may have two wills he can only have one Lord (self or God). The battle of wills is a battle of Lordship in his life.

Reflection: Often we view temptation as a purely negative thing (and it should be avoided whenever possible). But we should also realize that times of temptation are unique opportunities to declare the Lordship of Christ and God's supremacy over anything this world has to offer. With this in mind, remember that temptation can result in profound worship. This entire section of Augustine's *Confessions* is a testimony/praise of God's worth in light of his struggle with sin (something he came to see as being of much less value).

[Two paragraphs have been omitted here to abbreviate the length of the article and focus on the primary subject.]

CHAPTER XI
“The Struggle to Put Sin to Death”

Thus I was sick and tormented, reproaching myself more bitterly than ever, 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, did press upon me in my inmost heart with a severe mercy, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame; lest I should 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 quite. Still I did not fall back to my old condition, but stood aside for a moment and drew breath. And I tried again, and lacked only a very little of reaching the resolve—and then somewhat less, 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 way, to which I was habituated, 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 the moment approached, 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, trifles of trifles and vanities of vanities, who still enthralled me. They tugged at my fleshly garments and softly whispered: "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 and that be forbidden you forever?" What were they suggesting to me in those words "this or that"? What is it they suggested, O my God? Let Your mercy guard the soul of Your servant from the vileness and the shame they did suggest! 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 of them and leap over to the place to which I was being called—for unruly habit kept saying to me, "Do you think you can live without them?"

Here we hear the relationship that Augustine had with his sin – he still viewed his sin as his friend. Augustine struggles with listening to his sin as a trusted advisor and feels like forsaking his sin would be like betraying someone who has walked with him through many trials.

We often rely on our sin in the midst of hard times (i.e., stress relief or escape) and, thereby, begin to trust our sin as a friend. Because of this we feel like forsaking our sin would leave us alone in the midst of life's struggles. We believe our sin is more faithful than our God, because we can "control" our sin.

Reflection: Notice how Augustine fights this tendency by having a right view of wisdom (personified in the paragraph below) and the presence of his friend Alypius whom he confided in earlier. It is only when we make ourselves known to true friends and rightly view God's faithfulness that the treacherous nature of sin will ever be made clear to us in the midst of temptation. Sin is not your friend!

But now it said this very faintly; for in the direction I had set my face, and yet toward which I still trembled to go, the chaste dignity of continence appeared to me—cheerful but not wanton, modestly alluring me to come and doubt nothing, 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—her joys—by thee, 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 so stand not? 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 "trifles" and hung suspended. Again she seemed to speak: "Stop your ears against those unclean members of yours, that they may be mortified. They tell you of delights, but not according to the law of the Lord thy God." **This struggle raging in my heart was nothing but the contest of self against self. And Alypius kept close beside me,** and awaited in silence the outcome of my extraordinary agitation.

CHAPTER XII

"Augustine Surrenders His Life to God"

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

started 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. The streams of my eyes gushed out an acceptable sacrifice to thee. And, not indeed in these words, but to this effect, I cried to thee: "And thou, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord? Wilt thou be angry forever? Oh, remember not against us our former iniquities." (cf. Ps6:3; 79:8) 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 not this very hour make 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 of a boy or a girl I know not which—coming from the neighboring house, chanting over and over again, "Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it." 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, damming the torrent of my tears, I got 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 how Anthony, accidentally coming into church while the gospel was being read, received the admonition as if what was read had been addressed to him: "Go and sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me." (Matt 19:21) By such an oracle he was forthwith converted to You.

You may be wishing that God would speak to you in this same manner. It is appropriate to consider the fact that this article has found its way into your hands as a clear call from God. Consider the events that led to you getting a copy of this article and having the willingness to read it this far. That number of events is no less an act of God and God no less wants you to be free from your besetting sin. The message Augustine embraced (forsake self and everything else to rely fully on the grace of God found in Jesus Christ) is the same message God has for you and longs for you to embrace.

Augustine wrestled a long time wondering if that message was truth (his word was "certain") and whether it was for him. The doubt that you may feel at this moment is no different than the journey you have been reading for nine pages now. If you have never given your life to Christ, now is the best time. If you are a Christian, now is the time to surrender to eliminate this sin by fully embracing the steps outlined in this article.

"For [God] says, 'In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you (quoting Isaiah 49:8).'

So I quickly returned to the bench where Alypius was sitting, for there I had put down the apostle's book 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 chambering 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) I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, **there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.**

Closing the book, then, and putting my finger or something else for a mark **I began—now with a tranquil countenance—to tell it all 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 art "able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think." (Eph 3:20) For she saw that You had granted her far more than she had ever asked for in all her pitiful and doleful lamentations. For You did so convert me to You that I sought neither a wife nor any other of this world's hopes, but set my feet on that rule of faith which so many years before You had showed her in her dream about me. And so You did turn her grief into gladness more plentiful than she had ventured to desire, and dearer and purer than the desire she used to cherish of having grandchildren of my flesh.

Notice that the first thing that Augustine did was to share his change with others. Private change tends to be temporary change. Testimony is a way of reinforcing commitment. This is why the act of obedience of a new believer is the public act of baptism. Who do you need to share with about the commitment you have made?

It is important to note that Augustine considered his forsaking of sexual sin as his conversion. For this reason, he speaks of change as occurring at a point in time. For most of us our experience of change will occur over a longer period of time. Do not let that aspect of this article discourage you. The same key points of how God liberates his children from sin will still be relevant.

Application: Take the opportunity now to go back through the text boxes throughout this article. Answer the questions that are provided. These questions should direct you through the key things you should focus on to cooperate with God's work in your life.

It can be helpful to listen through a reading of this portion of Augustine's reflection as you seek to remember and implement this article. An excellent version is available narrated by Max McLean through *The Listener's Bible Company*.

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