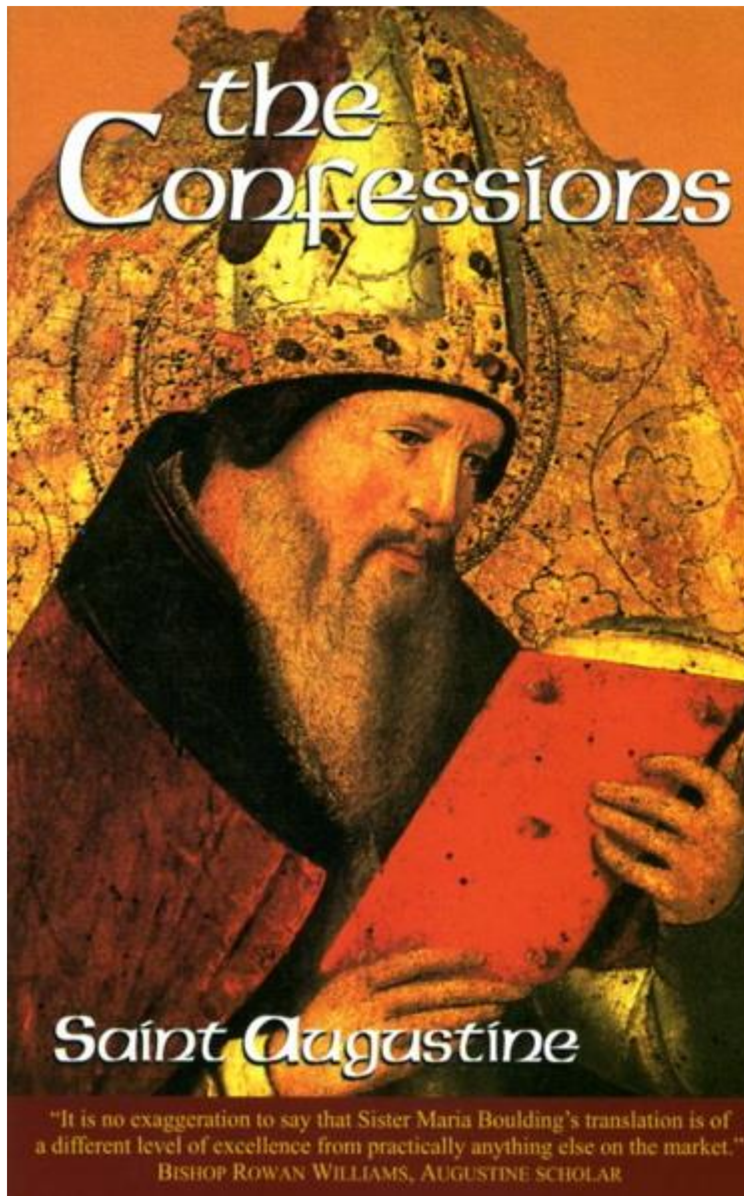
A Summary of "The Confessions of Saint Augustine"



A Summary of *The Confessions* of Saint Augustine

Summary by Rosie Prever
Written exclusively for The Goldhead Group, Ltd.
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About the Author

St. Augustine of Hippo was born in Thagaste, North Africa in 354 A.D. He studied law in Carthage, where he began to lead a wild and sinful life. He then became a teacher of literature and rhetoric in several places around the Roman Empire. The writings of Cicero interested him in philosophy, and made him aware of several great philosophical problems which he was anxious to resolve in his mind. He sought the answers in the Manichean religion, which he adhered to for nine years. After a great struggle he then converted to Christianity, gave up teaching, and devoted his life to prayer and study. He was ordained a priest a few years later and chosen to be the bishop of Hippo. His prolific writing caused him to be named a Doctor of the Church. His *Confessions*, credited as the world's first autobiography, is a personal, prayerful account of his conversion and contains a rich sampling of his theology and meditation.

General Overview

St. Augustine's *Confessions* is the story of a man of powerful intellect and passion and the tremendous struggle he went through before surrendering his life to God and embracing the Catholic Church. The process of searching for the truth and conquering the habits of sin made Augustine one of the greatest influences on literature, philosophy, and theology the world has ever known. By confessing his past and present weaknesses, Augustine hoped to impress upon his readers how absolutely dependent man is on God's grace. His own story demonstrates how even a man as gifted as he was, is helpless to do anything but wander from one mistake to the next until God rescued him.

Augustine's education prepared him to make many contributions to Christian scholarship, but it also opened the way to intellectual problems that delayed his conversion. His childhood prepared him to be a man of many friends, which allowed him to spread the Faith; but it also tempted him to follow his friends' bad examples. His teaching and travels brought him into contact with many different schools of thought, most notably Manichaeism and Platonism. All these influences combined to make Augustine a man who had known the world, but left it behind; a man who could look back on the world and judge it with a Christian eye, but understand it; and a man who could discern the world's disguised evils, but was still able to appreciate its good.

Childhood and Youth

With the familiar, confidential style used throughout the entire book, Augustine tells God that he is writing "for love of Your love." He explains his reasons further by stating that, first of all, he is confessing for the mere sake of confession; for though God knows all we have to say, it is still beneficial to "open our hearts" to Him—just as we are commanded to pray, even though God already knows our needs. But the *Confessions* is meant for men's eyes as well as God's. Augustine hopes that the example of his sinful life and reformation will inspire his readers and encourage them to praise the divine grace and mercy which brought about his conversion. He also includes an account of his reformed life after his conversion, so that the reader will join him in rejoicing at this happy state. Finally, he asks his readers to pray for his family, especially his parents, whose story he describes in some detail.

Augustine's father, Patricius, was a pagan, but his mother Monica was a devout Christian. They raised Augustine in Thagaste, North Africa, where he was given both a classical and a Christian education. As a child he believed in God, but his baptism was delayed—even when he was deathly ill—on the theory that he would only commit more sins, and his guilt would be greater because he had committed them after baptism. Thus the imprint of Christianity was left on his mind, but he was not held fast to the practice of it and soon drifted away.

Augustine remembers early childhood mostly in connection with his faults, which were evident even from infancy. He relates this to the Psalmist's confession, "I was born in sin and guilt was with me already when my

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mother conceived me." This concept of original sin figures greatly in Augustine's theology, and he uses the famous story of the pear tree to illustrate the way it was present in his actions as a child. With a group of friends, he stole a large number of pears from a farmer's tree, not to eat, but merely for the thrill of crime. Augustine saw in this an example of man's fallen will, which enjoys "doing wrong for no other reason than that it [is] wrong." It is only by God's merciful grace that we are forgiven, not only these perverse sins, but the others which we would have committed without His guidance.

The other memories Augustine focuses on from his childhood are of his education. He is grateful for the lessons he received—which enabled him, much later, to turn his literary talents to the service of God—but at the same time he regrets the temptations they afforded him. He was enthralled by classical literature, which made him grieve more for fictional characters like Dido than for his own sins, and by the theater, whose mythological scenes provided him with immoral examples. The writings of Cicero, however, brought him to a purer understanding of philosophy, and convinced him that he should love it not for its own sake, but for the sake of the eternal wisdom it strives to find. This led him on a long intellectual and spiritual search for truth which culminated in his conversion to the Catholic Church.

Meanwhile, however, another obstacle to conversion was beginning to surface: the problem of chastity. At sixteen Augustine went to study in Carthage, where, in his great desire for love, he became entangled in lust, took a mistress, and fathered an illegitimate son, Adeodatus. The prospect of renouncing not only illicit love, but even (much later) marriage, kept him from full conversion for a long time. It was only when he had overcome the other obstacles that he finally accepted his calling to celibacy.

The third great problem stemmed from a misconception of the nature of God and of spiritual being in general. He could form no conception of God except as a "bodily substance," and for the same reason he thought that evil was material. Thus in order to explain the origin of evil, he felt confronted with two choices: either God created evil, or evil arose from some other source beyond His control, and He was therefore not omnipotent. Because he did not yet realize that there was a third option—that evil arose from man's free will—Augustine concluded that there were two equal and opposite powers: good and evil. For this reason he fell in with the dualistic Manichees.

"One tale after another"

During the nine years that he was a Manichee, Augustine was troubled with doubts about Manichean doctrine, but he did not abandon it yet. He was told that a great teacher, Faustus, would come and answer all his questions. When Faustus finally came, however, he was unable to resolve Augustine's problems, especially on the subject of science. The Manichees mixed science with religion, and expected their followers to take their pseudo-science on faith. Augustine later identified the Manichees' chief failing in regard to science as their arrogant assumption that they were the final authority on the matter; but at the time, it was enough for him that their science was faulty. From that point on he lost his zeal for Manichaeism, but he was still not ready to renounce it.

Meanwhile, in his search for truth, Augustine had stumbled across another false answer: astrology. He was fooled by its apparent ability to predict the future. His friends Vindicianus and Nebridius tried to persuade him that the astrologers' success was pure chance, but he was not fully convinced until another friend, Firminus, proved it to him. Firminus was also a believer in astrology, but he told Augustine a story that finally convinced them both of their error. Firminus' father and his friend were both amateur astrologers, and they kept track of the births in their households so that they could cast the babies' horoscopes. The friend had a slave woman who happened to give birth at the same time as Firminus' mother. Firminus had not yet grasped the significance of this event, but Augustine realized it right away. If astrology were true, then Firminus and the slave baby would have had almost identical horoscopes, and thus similar lives; but Firminus was a rich nobleman, and the slave had remained a slave. For the same reason, twins should have similar futures, but they obviously do not. These two examples convinced Augustine to abandon his belief in astrology once and for all.

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The final blow came for Manichaeism, too. Augustine, who had been teaching literature and rhetoric in Rome, accepted an offer to teach in Milan. There he met Bishop Ambrose, whose preaching made an enormous impression on him. He had already become dissatisfied with the Manichees, but he had never considered Catholicism as a possible alternative, because he misunderstood its teachings**.** Ambrose took away some of his objections by showing him how to explain certain passages in the Bible figuratively, which, when interpreted literally, had confused him. With this new perspective he could no longer remain a Manichee, so he left and became a Catholic catechumen; but it was not for several years that he finally freed his mind from Manichean habits of thought and was able to embrace the Catholic Church fully.

Meanwhile he struggled with all of his old problems, almost despairing of finding the truth anywhere. Although Ambrose was interested in him and wanted to counsel him, the bishop was too busy. Augustine began to discuss his problems with his friends, Alypius and Nebridius, who joined him in his search for truth and happiness. He realized his miserable state when he discussed with them an encounter he had had with a beggar. The man had spent his alms on drinks and was utterly content, whereas Augustine, with all his learning and hard work, was unable to attain even the simple worldly happiness that the beggar had bought so cheaply. Later he realized that the only true happiness came from faith; but until then he continued to look for it in "fame and wealth and marriage." Marriage especially allured him, because he was unable to imagine himself finding happiness in celibacy. He proposed to a girl still too young to marry, hoping that marriage would enable him to settle down and be content; but his mistress was taken away from him, and because he was "more a slave of lust than a true lover of marriage," he took another, unable to wait for his bride. Thus his old temptations continued to hold sway over him, making his conversion even harder.

Despoiling the Platonists

The intellectual persuasion Augustine needed, however, was beginning to appear. He came across the books of the Platonists, which helped him to understand the origin of evil and the meaning of spiritual being. The Platonists taught that goodness was being. This corresponded with the Athenians' belief that "in [God] we live and move and have our being," and the sacred name of God in the Old Testament: "I am who am." God is absolute goodness and absolute being, and therefore anything else that exists must participate in His goodness and His being to a certain extent. The problem, then, is to reconcile God's goodness and omnipotence with the fact that there is evil in the world. The Platonists explained this by saying that "evil is nothing but the removal of good." Thus God did not create evil, but men with free will who could corrupt themselves if they wished. This view of evil as a deprivation rather than a positive substance was a satisfactory answer to Augustine's questions about the origin of evil; and because it prevented him from thinking of evil as some bodily substance, he ceased to think of goodness as an opposite and equal body.

At the same time, the Platonists helped him on his way to the Bible, because they contained much truth about God. They taught that the Son, the Word and Wisdom of God, was co-eternal with the Father; that through Him all things were created; and that men went astray and worshipped other gods instead. But they lacked the teachings of the Bible that the Son humbled himself by becoming man, that He died for our sins and rose again, and that His followers could become children of God. Augustine then returned to the Scriptures—the writings of St. Paul in particular—and found that they contained not only the rudimentary doctrines of the Platonists, but the rest as well: the Incarnation, the Passion, and the Redemption. They also had something the Platonists could never have written about: the love of God. With this love comes confession, repentance, and redemption, which outweigh the pride of the philosophers who think that they have gained their knowledge of God through their own intelligence. Augustine fell into this presumption for a time; but even when his knowledge was modified by the addition of the Bible, he did not reject the teachings of the Platonists. He likened the truths found in non-Christian philosophers to the gold carried away by the Hebrews in their exodus from Egypt. The truth in the Platonists is God's, just as the gold of the Egyptians was God's; and therefore God's people have the right to "despoil Egypt" and learn what they can from non-Christian philosophers.

The Final Steps

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By now Augustine was firmly convinced of the truth of Scripture, but he was still confused and bound to worldly cares. He went for advice to Simplicianus, who had been Ambrose's spiritual father. Simplicianus began by affirming Augustine's discovery of truth in the Platonists, in whom, he said, "God and His Word are constantly implied." Then, to encourage Augustine to take the final step to conversion, he told him the story of Victorinus, who had translated those same Platonists. Victorinus was a famous Roman scholar and a fervent defender of idol-worship. Like Augustine, he became intellectually convinced of the truth of Christianity, but he did not profess it publicly because he was afraid of alienating his pagan friends. But he soon realized that he would be punished for being too weak to acknowledge Christ to the world, and "turned in shame to the truth." Augustine was inspired to imitate Victorinus, but held back. He was bound by "inertia" of will and habit. "My will was perverse and lust had grown from it, and when I gave in to lust habit was born, and when I did not resist the habit it became a necessity." He compared his struggle to a condition that Paul described, in which "the impulses of nature and the impulses of the spirit are at war with one another." It was during this struggle that Augustine met the man who was to push him to a final resolution: Ponticianus.

Ponticianus, a devout Christian, noticed Augustine's interest in Paul's epistles, and told him that a similar interest in a saint had inspired his own conversion. He had read the life of St. Anthony of Egypt, who had severed his worldly attachments and gone into the desert to serve God. Ponticianus had suddenly seen the futility of his worldly ambitions and resolved to dedicate his life to God. His fiancée, as soon as she found out, had decided to consecrate her virginity to God as well. Augustine, again, was inspired to follow this holy example—especially because his mistress had, like Ponticianus' fiancée, sworn to remain celibate after their parting, but he had been too weak to follow her example. This story finally brought Augustine's struggle to a crisis. He looked at himself unequivocally for the first time and saw his despicable state. Instead of trying to give up his sins, he had been pretending that he was unable to do so. He had hidden behind the shelter of indecision, telling himself that he would surely renounce his sinful ways if only he could be convinced of the truth of Christianity. He had, in effect, been praying to God: "[G]ive me chastity and continence, but not yet;" for he really desired that his lust be "satisfied, not quelled." Now he had no excuse, and he was struggling to act on the realization of his true position; but the force of habit still held him back. The "old attachments" still bound him with the same question: "[D]o you think you can live without these things?" At this moment, "trembling at the barrier," Augustine saw the lady Continence. She showed him a "host of good examples," and told him that they had not remained chaste through their own strength, but had relied on the strength of God. The voice of habit was right that Augustine could not conquer his lust by himself, but that was not a reason to despair: God could heal him. The vision threw Augustine deeper into shame, but even this was not enough. To take the final step, he needed something close to a direct word from God.

Sitting in his garden, tormented by this struggle, Augustine suddenly heard a child singing, "Take it and read, take it and read." At first he thought it was a chant from some children's game, but he had never heard it before. Then he remembered that St. Anthony, hearing a passage from the Bible about giving all possessions to the poor and following God, had felt that it was speaking directly to him, and begun his monastic career. Augustine decided that the child's song was a divine command to open the Bible and, like Anthony, takes to heart the first passage his eyes fell on. He opened his book of Paul's epistles and read: "Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites." This verse brought Augustine complete confidence and peace. He showed it to Alypius, who immediately applied the following verse—"find room among you for a man of over-delicate conscience"—to himself and resolved to follow Augustine into the Church. They went inside and told Monica, who was "jubilant with triumph," for she had been suffering over her son's unbelief and praying for his conversion for many years. Now that her life-long desire had been fulfilled, she was ready to die; but Augustine was anxious to begin his new life.

The first thing he did after his conversion was to give up teaching, anxious to use his literary talent to serve God rather than the world. Meanwhile his circle of friends, who had struggled with him in their common search for the truth, reached the same goal. Nebridius and Verecundus—another teacher—converted before death, and Nebridius spread the Faith to his entire household. Alypius was baptized at the same time as

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Augustine, along with the fifteen-year-old Adeodatus. Together they began traveling back to Africa—but Monica died on the way.

Monica was the greatest influence in Augustine's life. He said that her role in his conversion was to give him spiritual birth—but with a labor much harder than that of physical birth. Monica's Christian life was a witness to everyone around her. She had managed to live in harmony with her hot-tempered and unfaithful husband, and had finally converted him just before his death. With the same patience she acted as a peace-maker between her friends and prayed unceasingly for her son's reformation. She was given assurance of his eventual conversion by a dream in which she and Augustine stood on the same rule of faith, and by a bishop who told her, "[i]t cannot be that the son of these tears should be lost." Monica took heart at these two incidents, but continued to pray and follow Augustine from city to city. Finally her dream came true, and she revealed to him that she now had no desire to keep living. She died two weeks later.

Augustine now began to devote his life to Christian study. Although he had renounced his former sins, however, temptations continued to plague him, and he was careful to confess these, too. For him, the devil attacked in three ways. The first attack was on the senses. Augustine saw danger in intemperate eating and in gratifying the eye, the ear, and even the sense of smell. While warning against over-indulgence of the senses, however, he also recognized that there was danger in the opposite extreme. Hymns, for example, could help elevate the soul to higher worship. Still, cluttering the mind with sensual curiosities created a distraction from higher things.

The second temptation was a desire to be loved, feared, or praised by other men. Augustine realized that, by allowing himself to be praised for his God-given qualities, he was letting the devil "divorce my joy from the truth" by glorifying in himself rather than in God. Here again, however, there was a danger of going to the opposite extreme: the man who glories in his humility is as proud as the man who glories in his greatness.

The third temptation was the gratification of the mind's "futile curiosity." This is connected to the gratification of the eyes, because it involves an intemperate curiosity about things which it is not necessary for man to know. Augustine warns constantly about the dangers of "idle speculation," of seeking knowledge for the mere sake of knowledge.

Return to Philosophy

Having overcome Manichaeism, and guarding against vain speculation, Augustine now felt ready to return to philosophical and theological inquiry with a proper Christian attitude. He begins by trying to explain his own mind. "I have become a problem to myself," he confesses, marveling at his senses and his memory. In his search for knowledge of God, he had looked first to the material world, whose beauty told him only that God had created it. He realized that he had to go to the "next stage:" memory. He describes the memory as a storehouse of three things: the images of material objects, the impressions or ideas of emotions, and knowledge itself. It has a wonderful power for saving memories, for separating different ones, and for bringing them out at the proper time; but it could not tell Augustine more about God. God is beyond memory.

Augustine then proceeds to a higher level: the soul. The soul is the life of the body, but it is not the highest thing. God is "the life of souls, the life of lives," because He is life itself. He is absolute being—as Augustine learned from the Platonists—and has all perfections. He is just and yet merciful, beautiful and yet strong, active and yet always at rest. He is always near to us even when we are far from Him. Man's instinct is to praise this perfection, and his desire is to find rest in God's presence.

Because we draw our being from God, He must be eternal. Our past, present, and future exist in His eternal "today," for He created time itself. And just as we draw our life from this eternal Life, we draw our law from this eternal Justice. God's law is unchanging, and just human law conforms to it. Certain things are

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unchangeable, but others change depending on the time. Things permitted in the past are forbidden today; but while the commandments change, the justice they manifest remains the same.

In addition to these philosophical matters, Augustine began to re-examine Scripture; but using the lessons he had learned from Christianity, he was careful to set about it the right way. He interpreted many passages allegorically rather than literally, as Ambrose had taught him. But this led to two problems: which was the right interpretation, and how could it be found? Augustine objected strongly to those who insisted that there was only one proper interpretation, and who claimed that they were the ones who knew what it was. He saw Scripture—especially the Old Testament—as open to many interpretations, all of which were true. He thought it arrogant to claim to have the one and only correct reading when faced with two different interpretations which were both consistent with the truth. The writers of Scripture were inspired, so it was possible for their writing to be full of different meanings—even ones which the writers themselves had not intended. The best approach to Scripture is, of course, prayer: prayer for help in understanding the Bible, and prayer for a cleansing of the mind to guard against pride. Augustine starts with such a prayer and then proceeds to meditate on the beginning of the book of Genesis.

He begins by explaining that when God created "in the beginning," the Beginning was His Son—the "abiding principle" of truth and wisdom. The Son was also the Word God spoke to create the heaven and the earth out of nothing. The heaven God created by this utterance was the "Heaven of Heavens" referred to in the Psalms. It is a purely intellectual creation, the dwelling place of God, which exists in perpetual contemplation of His beauty. The "earth" was prime matter, as indicated by the verse that describes it as "without form and void." God took this formless matter and created our world.

The "light" which God created is the spiritual creation, which draws its light from its attachment to God. When men and angels fell, they lost their light; and this is the meaning of God separating the light from the darkness. The firmament, which separated the waters, signifies God's unshakable authority, embodied in Scripture. The waters above are the faithful angels, "safe from earthly corruption" and close to God. The sun, the greater light to the world, is the wisdom given to some of God's children; the moon is the knowledge given to others. The stars are the charisms, the various gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Below the firmament, however, the bitter waters of the sea—mankind estranged from God—toss and turn in a futile struggle for earthly happiness. The dry land, which sustains the good man and bears the fruit of works of mercy, is drawn apart from the bitter sea and nourished with sweet water. The sea is not abandoned, however; it is given the fish (God's Sacraments, especially Baptism), the birds (God's messengers, spreading the Good News), and the great sea monsters (miracles). The good souls on dry land are already servants of God and do not need the help given to the estranged souls, but they have to tame the animals on the dry land, which are earthly temptations.

Having already learned that God created time, Augustine was faced with the problem of explaining the seven days of creation. He realized that, although God was outside of time, His creations were in time; therefore His act of creation was manifested in the medium of time as seven days. Whatever the significance of the number seven, however, the seventh day, because it has no evening, represents the final day of rest at the end of time: the day when we will rest in God and He—who has been working in our lives—will rest in us.

Finally, Augustine was able to "catch a faint glimpse of the Trinity" in the Old Testament. As he explains when discussing the very beginning of Genesis, the Father is referred to as "God" in the creation story, and the Son is known as His "word." The Holy Spirit is, of course, the "Spirit of God" that was "hovering over the waters." And again, when God creates man, He proposes to create him in "Our image," not in "My image." This plural is used inconsistently, according to Augustine, to call special attention to God's "Trinity of Unity or…Unity of Trinity."

Conclusion

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Augustine ends these interpretations—and the book—with a humble admission that he cannot fully understand his own interpretations without God's help. He attributes every step of his conversion to "divine goodness," whose nature it is "not only to open to those who knock but also to cause them to knock and ask." Augustine is glad to offer proof of this benevolent grace in his own story: the life of a great sinner who knocked at God's door and was admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven.

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