

Reading
with
Leader's
Guide

VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

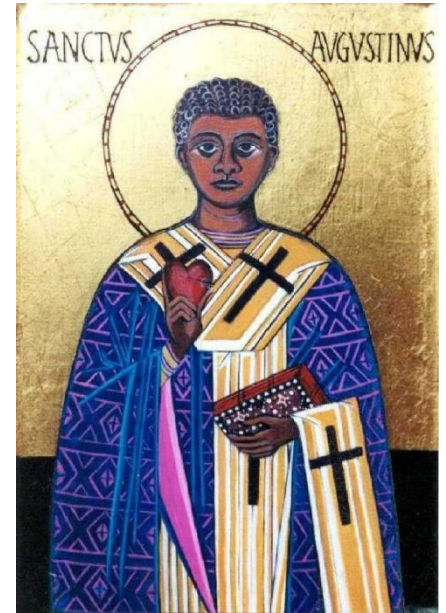
{Sin creates fear in us and drives us into hiding—and our habits keep us stuck there. But God knows and, as Augustine says, watches over our secret hearts, even when we feel that we are far away from God. God wants nothing more than to rescue us from the miseries of our own making; God seeks after us—with patience, kindness and forbearance. —Karen Wright Marsh}

Augustine (354-430)

*These excerpts are from Augustine's classic work, *The Confessions*. He begins with a prayer.*

*As I read this first passage out loud, listen for Augustine's description of the relationship **between God and humanity**.*

1. You are great, O God, and very worthy of praise: mighty is our power and your wisdom is immeasurable. And humankind, which is part of your creation, wishes to praise you: we who bear the burden of mortality, who carry it around as a testimony to our own sin and to your opposition to the proud. And yet still we wish to praise you, we who are part of your creation. You rouse us to take delight in praising you, because you made us for your own and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.



...Those who seek God will praise God, for they who seek God will find God, and when they find God they can but praise God. Let me seek you, God, by calling upon you; and let me call upon you when I believe in you: for the news of you has been preached to us. It is my faith that calls upon you, God, which you granted me, which you breathed into me through the humanity of your Son, through the ministry of your preacher. (1:1)

What action words, what verbs can you find in this passage? Speak them out loud now. {just a word or phrase}

What do you think is Augustine's picture of God?

What does Augustine say about humanity? Where does his description of people and their struggles ring true for you?

Augustine says that those who seek God will find God. Do you agree that anyone who seeks God will find God? Why or why not?

What has been your own experience of seeking God? What has that looked like?

2. Many years—about twelve—had passed since my nineteenth year when I had read Cicero's *Hortensius* and been stimulated by this work to search for wisdom. But...I had put off finding time to seek out wisdom. Yet the search for wisdom, let alone its discovery, should be valued more highly than the discovery of all the world's treasures and kingdoms. More highly than all those physical pleasures I could command at will. I was an

unhappy young man, as despairing as I had been as an adolescent when I had prayed to you for chastity with the words, 'Grant me chastity and the will to abstain, but not yet.' I was afraid then that you would hear my prayer too quickly and cure me of the disease of lust which I preferred to appease rather than to suppress.

Now the time had come for me to be stripped naked before myself, and my conscience rebuked me, asking, 'What has happened to you? I thought you said you said you could not cast off the burden of your empty life while you still had doubts about the truth? Yet now you have no more doubts, and still this burden oppresses you, while other people who have not exhausted themselves with ten years or more of endless searching and thinking have cast off their burdens and taken on wings? (8:7)

What do you notice about Augustine's struggle here?

Where has intellectual learning and debate helped you towards faith?

Augustine asks himself, "I thought you said you said you could not cast off the burden of your empty life while you still had doubts about the truth? Yet now you have no more doubts, and still this burden oppresses you."

What do you think could be holding Augustine back from freedom? What advice would you give to the young man Augustine?

Augustine goes on to say more about his inner debate.

3. My inner self was a house divided against itself...It is a disease of the mind which does not wholly rise to the heights where it is lifted by the truth because it is weighed down by habit. So there are two wills in us, because neither by itself is the whole will, and each possesses what the other lacks....When I was trying to reach a decision about serving the Lord my God, as I had long intended to do, it was I who willed to take this course and again it was I who willed not to take it. It was I and I alone. But I neither willed to do it nor refused to do it with my full will. So I was at odds with myself. I was throwing myself into confusion. All this happened to me although I did not want it, but it did prove that there was some second mind in me besides my own.... (8:8)

Imagine Augustine is right here, saying these words to us now. What are your feelings as he describes his dilemma?

Have you ever experienced anything like this? Would you be willing to share a bit of that story?

As he writes his Confessions, Augustine is looking back on his journey. He imagines God's view of him in this next passage:

4. And you, O Lord, never ceased to watch over my secret heart. In your stern mercy you lashed me with the twin scourge of fear and shame in case I should give way once more and the worn and slender chain should not be broken but gain new strength and bind me all the faster. In my heart I kept saying, "Let it be now, let it be now!" and merely by saying this I was on the point of making the resolution. I was on the point of making it, but I did not succeed. Yet I did not fall back into my old state. I stood on the brink of the resolution, waiting to take a fresh breath. I tried again and came a little nearer to my goal, and then came a little nearer still, so that I could almost reach out and grasp it.

But I did not reach it. I could not reach out to grasp it, because I held back from the step by which I should die to death and become alive to life. My lower instincts, which had taken hold of me, were stronger than the higher, which were untried. And the closer I came to the moment which was to mark the great change in me,

the more I shrank from it in horror. But it did not drive me back or turn me from my purpose: it merely left me hanging in suspense....

I was held back by all my old attachments. They plucked at my garment of flesh and whispered, "Are you going to dismiss us? From this moment we shall never be with you again, for ever and ever. From the moment on you will never again be allowed to do this thing or that." What was it, my God, when they whispered, "this thing or that"? Things so sordid and shameful that I beg you in your mercy to keep the soul of your servant free from them! In my state of indecision, they kept me from tearing myself away, from shaking myself free of them and leaping across the barrier to the other side where you were calling me. Habit was too strong for me when it asked, "Do you think you can live without these things?" (8:11)

In the first paragraph, Augustine speaks of fear and shame as twin scourges of God's mercy. What do you make of that idea?

Later Augustine speaks of his lower instincts, his old attachments, as if they are beings who touch him and speak to him. If you are willing to share... What are your unhealthy attachments? What would they say to you if they could speak?

What is it about habits that might keep us back from making the final break and a decision for God?

5. While I stood trembling at the barrier, on the other side I could see the chaste beauty of Continnence (*self restraint, moderation) in all her serene, unsullied joy, as she modestly beckoned me to cross over and to hesitate no more. She stretched out loving hands to welcome and embrace me, holding up a host of good examples in my sight. She smiled at me to give me courage, as though she were saying, "Can you not do what these men and women do? Do you think they find the strength to do it in themselves and not in the Lord their God? It was the Lord their God who gave me to them. Why do you try to stand in your own strength and fail? Cast yourself upon God and have no fear. He will not shrink away and let you fall. Cast yourself upon him without fear, for he will welcome you and cure you of your ills."

I was overcome with shame, because I was still listening to the futile mutterings of my lower self and I was still hanging in suspense. And again Continnence seemed to say, "Close your ears to the unclean whispers of your body, so that it may be mortified. It tells you of things that delight you, but not such things as the law of the Lord your God has to tell." (8:11)

Now beautiful Continnence enters the picture! As in many works of literature, this virtue is embodied as a woman. The figure of Continnence shows Augustine the examples of godly men and women. When has the life and witness of another Christian encouraged, challenged, moved you?

In the next passage, Augustine is at his wits end—and we may have had enough of his indecision, too. He throws an all out tantrum! How will God rescue this struggling, sobbing sinner? Let's read on...

6. I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I mustered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me. Somehow I flung myself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to tears which now streamed from my eyes. For I felt that I was still the captive of my sins, and in misery I kept crying, "How long shall I go on saying, 'Tomorrow, tomorrow'? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?"

I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the singing of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain, "Take it and read, take it and read." At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before.

I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. So I hurried back to the place where I had put down the book containing Paul's epistles. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: "Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites." (Rom. 13:13,14)

I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled. I marked the place with my finger and closed the book. You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer placed any hope in this world but stood firmly upon the rule of faith. (8:12)

So how does God reach Augustine? What are the keys to his conversion?

What is it about the child's chanting voice that moves Augustine towards God at last? Has God ever called out to you in a surprising or playful way?

In our final paragraph from The Confessions, Augustine speaks to God of his own story:

7. So late did I love you, beauty so ancient and so new, so late did I love you! See, you were within me and I was in the external world, looking for you there. In my ugly state I rushed headlong towards these lovely things which you created. You were with me, and I was not with you. Those lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not exist in you, then they did not exist at all. You called, you shouted, you shattered my deafness; you shone with dazzling light and dispelled my blindness; you were fragrant and I breathed in deeply and now I am breathless with longing for you. I tasted and now I hunger and thirst for you; you touched me and now I burn with desire for the peace that is yours. (10:27)

Augustine reflects on his life. As he looks back, what does he see?

Is there any one idea that you've considered for the first time today?

What can Augustine teach you about your own spiritual life?

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