

Augustine: Captive of Grace

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There is nothing more beautiful in the whole world than the grace of God. God's grace! Grace that takes hold of a man, a man who is dead in sin, and revives him; grace that takes the spiritually deformed and refashions him in image of Jesus Christ; grace that takes an ugly sinner and beautifies him, causing him to reflect the beauty and holiness of God. God's grace: sovereign, free, unmerited—that is what makes a saint! The life of every one of God's people testifies to this truth. We see this beautifully illustrated when we look back at church history and work of God in the lives of the saints who came before us. In this short article, we will look at the story of Augustine's life and conversion, a wonderful story about a man once lost, but caught up and captivated by the grace of God. Augustine's life is a testimony to the truth of Romans 8:28, that God works "all things for the good" of his chosen people. Augustine's every step was ordered by God for the purpose God had for him in his church. Augustine, the man whom God would prepare to be the church's greatest teacher and defender of the doctrine of grace, God first caused to experience, in the midst of his profound misery and sin, the power of that sovereign grace to rescue him from himself, as a firebrand is plucked from the burning. In Augustine's life we also see ourselves: poor ugly sinners, of ourselves lost, yet who have experienced the saving, renewing, life-giving grace of our God in Jesus Christ.

The story of St. Augustine begins three and a half centuries after Christ's ministry on earth. On November 13 354 AD, Aurelius Augustine was born to a humble family residing in Thagaste. Thagaste was a small town located in the northeastern hill country of Numidia on Northern coast of Africa (near the border of modern Algeria and Tunisia). It served as market town on the cross roads between larger, more important cities. The countryside was very fertile, the breadbasket of the Roman Empire. Here, surrounded by rolling hills of olive groves and grain fields, one of the church's greatest theologians grew up as an ordinary country boy with an uncommonly keen mind. Under Roman rule and protection North Africa was guaranteed a permanent market for its agricultural goods. The region soon became very prosperous, and with prosperity there came opportunity. But Augustine's parents were poor. His pagan father Patricius was low-level civil servant who owned small estate of but a couple of acres. Patricius was a proud and unpleasant man who took little interest in Augustine beyond his hope that his son would one day obtain a prestigious secular career. To that end, Patricius secured the resources needed to give Augustine a classical education—something that in those days was absolutely necessary if one was to get anywhere in society. At age twelve Augustine was sent to a nearby town for further schooling. Augustine's mother Monica was quite different. A devout Christian, she did everything in her power to guide Augustine in the way of faith. In spite of the worldly-mindedness of her unfaithful husband, she taught him by word and godly example and brought him to church. Daily she prayed for the conversion of her son. Augustine loved his mother deeply, but as a young man he followed more in the footsteps of his father, preferring the things

of the world over the things of God. Soon his family's money ran out. Augustine had no choice but to discontinue his schooling and return home. However, a wealthy citizen of Thagaste noticed Augustine's great potential and provided the funds he needed to resume his education. Soon Augustine was bound for the bustling city of Carthage, the capital of Roman North Africa, to attend university.

In Carthage Augustine fell into loose living and the foolishness of youth. He gave himself over to the carnal delights available in the thoroughly pagan and immoral city. He became enamored with the theatre and filthy plays held there. At the young age of 18 he took a mistress and with her fathered a son. Drifting from one pleasure to the next, he found that they all left him empty. Restless, he dedicated himself to his studies with renewed zeal, hoping to find in the world's wisdom a strong foundation for his life. In the course of his studies he discovered the Roman orator Cicero, who taught that the good life was to be found in the way of self-restraint and the pursuit of wisdom. Still his soul could find no rest. He saw that the way he lived fell far short of the restrained lives of philosophers he so admired. He felt ashamed of his disordered and undisciplined life. Yet he found himself powerless to break the chains of sinful pleasure. He loved his sins, yet at the same time was haunted by them. Augustine recalls this time of his life in his Confessions, and describes wayward and godless life he led during those years:

“To Carthage I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves....I sought what I might love, in love with loving, and safety I hated, and the way without snares. For within me was a famine of that inward food, Thyself my God; yet, through that famine I was not hungered...but the more empty, the more I loathed it. For this cause my soul was sickly and full of sores, it miserably cast itself forth, desiring to be scraped by the touch of objects of sense.”¹

While studying in Carthage, Augustine turned to Manicheism for the answers to his life questions. Manicheism, a religion founded by the Persian sage Mani, gathered and mingled ideas from Christianity, paganism, and philosophy. Mani taught that the universe was marked by an eternal conflict between good and evil. Mani identified evil with the creation and identified good with the spiritual realm. Manichean teachers promised their disciples secret knowledge that would liberate them from the chains of the material world and allow them to cultivate the “spark of the divine” within them. This cult attracted Augustine, and for a while he became enthralled with the Manicheans' mysterious theology. But Manicheism too left him empty and searching. It could neither answer his hardest questions nor satisfy his deepest longings. Where was truth to be found? Augustine continued to wander, unable to find a resting place for his heart. From Manicheism he drifted to the books of the skeptical philosophers. “Perhaps truth cannot be found.” he thought. “Perhaps it is impossible to know.” Augustine's own sense of being lost drove him to seek solace for a time in the miserable teachings of the lost. But the more he

¹ Confessions, 3.1.1.

learned, the more he wandered, the more lost he felt. No matter how much knowledge he obtained, no matter how hard he applied his powerful intellect to the questions of life, he could not find the rest his heart yearned for. To add to the internal chaos of his life, during his days in Carthage one of his closest friends was suddenly seized with illness and died shortly thereafter. The loss of his close friend was nearly too much for Augustine to bear. Despair clawed at his soul. All of these things were the goads by which the Holy Spirit spurred him on toward the truth. As Augustine would later recognize, even in his deepest darkness God was there with him, ordering his steps, so that he would not perish in the darkness, but emerge into the glorious light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even in the darkness of unbelief, God held Augustine in his hand.

Augustine finished his schooling in Carthage at the top of his class. His brilliance in literature and public speaking gained him no small fame, and he became a teacher of rhetoric in Carthage. But Augustine had bigger ambitions. He set his sights on a more prestigious career in oratory in Rome. Thus in 383, at 29 years of age, he took his leave of Carthage and set sail for Rome in search of greater public honor. A year later a teaching post opened up in the city of Milan, and an oratory competition was held. In God's providence, Augustine won the competition and moved to Milan to take up the position as the city's new teacher of rhetoric. Here in Milan, God would bring this prodigal son, long lost and wandering, home at last. Not long after settling in Milan Augustine heard about the city's famous bishop, the saintly Ambrose. Ambrose was renowned not only for his godliness, but also for his eloquent preaching. That piqued the ambitious orator's interest. Augustine began attending church, not out of interest in the gospel, but in the hope that he could pick up a few tips on public speaking from Ambrose. But God had another purpose. He used Augustine's carnal motives for the salvation of his soul, to bring Augustine under the means of grace, and by those means, the Holy Spirit operated in Augustine's sickly heart. As Augustine sat under Ambrose's preaching, his former interest in the bishop's eloquence melted away. The unanticipated began to happen. Augustine found himself more and more captivated by the word of God that Ambrose preached. He had come to hear a man's eloquence, but instead he was conquered by the simplicity of Christ. Sovereign grace laid hold of him. There was no escaping it.

As Augustine sat under the preaching, the vanity of his life was again thrust before his eyes. He was convicted. He was stricken with a mounting sense of guilt over his immoral lifestyle, his inability to control his passions, and a sense of the meaningless vanity of his life. Like the apostle Paul, the good he willed to do he found himself powerless to perform, and the evil he desired not to do he found himself powerless to keep himself from doing. He yearned for holiness, but despaired of ever reaching it. Augustine at last began to turn to the scriptures for help. For years Augustine had disdained the Bible that his mother loved much. He despised it as an ineloquent book of Jewish fables. But now he had nowhere else to turn. So it was one day that as he sat in the courtyard of his home mulling over the agony of his spirit and weeping over his inability to do good, Augustine opened the Bible. He turned to the thirteenth chapter of Romans

and read. Augustine tells us of his experience in one of the most moving passages of his Confessions:

So was I speaking and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo! I heard from a neighboring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting and oft repeating "Take up and read; Take up and read"....So checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God to open the book, and read the first chapter I should find. Eagerly then, I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting; for there had I laid the volume of the Apostle when I arose thence. I seized, opened, and in silence read that section on which my eyes first fell: "not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof." No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.²

As the word of the gospel flooded into Augustine's heart, the work of grace that God had long been working in Augustine's heart blossomed. The long process of his conversion had reached its climax. Augustine stood before the face of God with all his sins, and experienced their weight lifted from his shoulders. In place of his sins, the peace that passes all understanding filled his heart, the peace that dispels all fear, the peace that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Finally, after years of wandering and searching, he found the only resting place for his heart. In the scriptures, Augustine found Christ, the way, the truth, and the life, whom for thirty years he fled. This was the turning point of his whole life.

With his conversion to the faith and baptism into the church, Augustine's old life came to an end. But his new life was just beginning. God had great plans for him. Augustine was quickly thrust into the center of the church in Africa. Filled with zeal for his new faith, he quit his teaching post in Milan and returned to his hometown with a group of friends, hoping to establish a small community of Christians dedicated to living together and studying the scriptures. Augustine hoped to retreat from public life to the contemplative life of study and writing. Such would not be case. One day, when Augustine was visiting a vacant congregation in the busy port city of Hippo, the people of the church laid hands upon him and had him forcibly ordained as their minister. Although Augustine did not seek the office, he took it up with utmost seriousness and dedicated himself to the work of pastoring the congregation of Hippo. Augustine's charge was not an easy one. Many of the members of the church in Hippo were uneducated laborers, given to superstition and inconsistencies in their Christian lives. Vices such as drunkenness were a common problem. In order to address and remedy the sins of his flock, Augustine committed himself to preaching the gospel. He vigorously addressed his people, admonishing, rebuking, instructing, and comforting. God caused his faithful labors to bear fruit. Under his care the life of the church of Hippo was much improved. The transformation he found in the gospel, he brought to others.

² Confessions 8.12.29.

It was not long before Augustine's gifts, not just as a theologian, but as a pastor, became well known. As a result, he was elected the new bishop of Hippo in the summer of 395 and given pastoral oversight over all the churches in the city. As bishop, Augustine's labors only increased. He took a personal role in caring for the widows and orphans of his city. He visited the sick. He oversaw cases of discipline in the church. Above all, Augustine devoted himself to preaching the gospel. He preached at least twice a week, often for well over an hour, instructing the people God had entrusted to his care. Augustine discharged his office faithfully as the bishop of Hippo for the rest of his life. He died peacefully in 430 shortly before the conquest of his city by the Vandals. Augustine's influence reached far beyond the churches of Africa. Indeed, Augustine shaped not only the African church, but also the mind of the entire western church. By his study of the scriptures and his deep theological writings, Augustine contributed to the development of almost every important area of Christian doctrine. A man saved powerfully by sovereign grace, he became the church's greatest theologian and teacher of grace.

There is much we can learn from Augustine's life: his experience of grace, his spirituality, his love for God, and his biblical teaching. The story of Augustine's life is really a story of all of our lives. The details of the plot may differ, but the themes remain the same for every one of us. We all were lost, but have been rescued. God has made us for himself; he has made us for the praise of the glory of his grace. That grace captivates us, draws us to him, and causes us to enter into the joy of his fellowship. It is there, in God's fellowship, by grace, that our restless hearts find everlasting rest. In his grace alone there is rest, the rest of being caught up in the everlasting arms of God, safe beneath the shadow of his wings. Augustine's life is a vivid picture of this beautiful story of saving grace. Every one of us, God's adopted sons and daughters by grace, can say with St. Augustine, "Thou hast made me for thyself! How restless I was till I found my rest in thee, O Father, the light and love of my heart, my soul's refuge, the God of my salvation."

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