

The Confessions (Book I)

Augustine of Hippo

Patristic · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Confession

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INTRODUCTION

The Confessions opens with one of the most celebrated sentences in Christian literature — "our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee" — and then descends, unexpectedly, into infancy. Augustine watches himself as a child learning language, absorbing vanity from his schooling, and loving the wrong things with great energy. The theology here is precise beneath the autobiography: desire itself is not the problem, only its misdirection. A natural entry point for readers new to Augustine.

Commencing with the invocation of God, Augustine relates in detail the beginning of his life, his infancy and boyhood, up to his fifteenth year; at which age he acknowledges that he was more inclined to all youthful pleasures and vices than to the study of letters.

Chapter 1. He Proclaims the Greatness of God, Whom He Desires to Seek and Invoke, Being Awakened by Him.

Great are You, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Your power, and of Your wisdom there is no end. And man, being a part of Your creation, desires to praise You — man, who bears about with him his mortality, the witness of his sin, even the witness that You resist the proud, — yet man, this part of Your creation, desires to praise You. You move us to delight in praising You; for You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You. \[cor nostrum _inquietum_ est donec _requiescat_ in Te\] Lord, teach me to know and understand which of these should be first: to call on You, or to praise You; and likewise to know You, or to call on You. But who calls upon You without knowing You? For he that knows You not may call upon You as other than You are. Or perhaps we call on You that we may know You. But how shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? Or how shall they believe without a preacher? Romans 10:14 And those who seek the Lord shall praise Him. For those who seek shall find Him, Matthew 7:7 and those who find Him shall praise Him. Let me seek You, Lord, in calling on You, and call on You in believing in You; for You have been preached unto us. O Lord, my faith calls on You — that faith which You have imparted to me, which You have breathed into me through the incarnation of Your Son, through the ministry of Your preacher.

Chapter 2. That the God Whom We Invoke is in Us, and We in Him.

And how shall I call upon my God — my God and my Lord? For when I call on Him I ask Him to come into me. And what place is there in me into which my God can come — into which God can come, even He who made heaven and earth? Is there anything in me, O Lord my God, that can contain You? Do indeed the very heaven and the earth, which You have made, and in which You have made me, contain You? Or, as nothing could exist without You, does whatever exists contain You? Why, then, do I ask You to come into me, since I indeed exist, and could not exist if You were not in me? Because I am not yet in hell, though You are even there; for if I go down into hell You are there. I could not therefore exist, could not exist at all, O my God, unless You were in me. Or should I not rather say, that I could not exist unless I were in You from whom are all things, by whom are all things, in whom are all things? Romans 11:36 Even so, Lord; even so. Where do I call You to, since You are in me, or whence can You come into me? For where outside heaven and earth can I go that from thence my God may come into me who has said, I fill heaven and earth? Jeremiah 23:24

Chapter 3. Everywhere God Wholly Fills All Things, But Neither Heaven Nor Earth Contains Him.

Since, then, You fill heaven and earth, do they contain You? Or, as they contain You not, do You fill them, and yet there remains something over? And where do You pour forth that which remains of You when the heaven and earth are filled? Or, indeed, is there no need that You who contains all things should be contained of any, since those things which You fill You fill by containing them? For the vessels which You fill do not sustain You, since should they even be broken You will not be poured forth. And when You are poured forth on us, Acts 2:18 You are not cast down, but we are uplifted; nor are You dissipated, but we are drawn together. But, as You fill all things, fill them with Your whole self, or, as even all things cannot altogether contain You, do they contain a part, and do all at once contain the same part? Or has each its own proper part — the greater more, the smaller less? Is, then, one part of You greater, another less? Or is it that You are wholly everywhere while nothing altogether contains You? [In this section, and constantly throughout the *_Confessions_*, he refers to the materialistic views concerning God held by the Manichæans.]

Chapter 4. The Majesty of God is Supreme, and His Virtues Inexplicable.

What, then, are You, O my God — what, I ask, but the Lord God? For who is Lord but the Lord? Or who is God save our God? Most high, most excellent, most potent, most omnipotent; most piteous and most just; most hidden and most near; most beauteous and most strong, stable, yet contained of none; unchangeable, yet changing all things; never new, never old; making all things new, yet bringing old age upon the proud and they know it not; always working, yet ever at rest; gathering, yet needing nothing; sustaining, pervading, and protecting; creating, nourishing, and developing; seeking, and yet possessing all things. You love, and burn not; You are jealous, yet free from care; You repent, and have no sorrow; You are angry, yet serene; You change Your ways, leaving unchanged Your plans; You

recover what You find, having yet never lost; You are never in want, while You rejoice in gain; You are never covetous, though requiring usury. Matthew 25:27 That You may owe, more than enough is given to You, \[_Supererogatur tibi, ut debeas_\] yet who has anything that is not Yours? You pay debts while owing nothing; and when You forgive debts, lose nothing. Yet, O my God, my life, my holy joy, what is this that I have said? And what says any man when He speaks of You? Yet woe to those who keep silence, seeing that even they who say most are as the dumb.

Chapter 5. He Seeks Rest in God, and Pardon of His Sins.

Oh! How shall I find rest in You? Who will send You into my heart to inebriate it, so that I may forget my woes, and embrace You my only good? What are You to me? Have compassion on me, that I may speak. What am I to You that You demand my love, and unless I give it You art angry, and threaten me with great sorrows? Is it, then, a light sorrow not to love You? Alas! Alas! Tell me of Your compassion, O Lord my God, what You are to me. Say unto my soul, I am your salvation. So speak that I may hear. Behold, Lord, the ears of my heart are before You; open them, and say unto my soul, I am your salvation. When I hear, may I run and lay hold on You. Hide not Your face from me. Let me die, lest I die, if only I may see Your face.

Cramped is the dwelling of my soul; expand it, that You may enter in. It is in ruins, restore it. There is that about it which must offend Your eyes; I confess and know it, but who will cleanse it? Or to whom shall I cry but to You? Cleanse me from my secret sins, O Lord, and keep Your servant from those of other men. I believe, and therefore do I speak; Lord, You know. Have I not confessed my transgressions unto You, O my God; and You have put away the iniquity of my heart? I do not contend in judgment with You, Job 9:3 who art the Truth; and I would not deceive myself, lest my iniquity lie against itself. I do not, therefore, contend in judgment with You, for if You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?

Chapter 6. He Describes His Infancy, and Lauds the Protection and Eternal Providence of God.

Still suffer me to speak before Your mercy — me, dust and ashes. Genesis 18:27 Allow me to speak, for, behold, it is Your mercy I address, and not derisive man. Yet perhaps even You deride me; but when You are turned to me You will have compassion on me. Jeremiah 12:15 For what do I wish to say, O Lord my God, but that I know not whence I came hither into this — shall I call it dying life or living death? Yet, as I have heard from my parents, from whose substance You formed me — for I myself cannot remember it — Your merciful comforts sustained me. Thus it was that the comforts of a woman's milk entertained me; for neither my mother nor my nurses filled their own breasts, but You by them gave me the nourishment of infancy according to Your ordinance and that bounty of Yours which underlies all things. For You caused me not to want more than You gave, and those who nourished me willingly to give me what You gave them. For they, by an instinctive affection, were anxious to give me what You had abundantly supplied. It was, in truth, good for them that my good should come from them, though, indeed, it was not from them, but by them; for from You, O God, are all good things, and from my God

is all my safety. Proverbs 21:31 This is what I have since discovered, as You have declared Yourself to me by the blessings both within me and without me which You have bestowed upon me. For at that time I knew how to suck, to be satisfied when comfortable, and to cry when in pain — nothing beyond.

Afterwards I began to laugh — at first in sleep, then when waking. For this I have heard mentioned of myself, and I believe it (though I cannot remember it), for we see the same in other infants. And now little by little I realized where I was, and wished to tell my wishes to those who might satisfy them, but I could not; for my wants were within me, while they were without, and could not by any faculty of theirs enter into my soul. So I cast about limbs and voice, making the few and feeble signs I could, like, though indeed not much like, unto what I wished; and when I was not satisfied — either not being understood, or because it would have been injurious to me — I grew indignant that my elders were not subject unto me, and that those on whom I had no claim did not wait on me, and avenged myself on them by tears. That infants are such I have been able to learn by watching them; and they, though unknowing, have better shown me that I was such an one than my nurses who knew it.

And, behold, my infancy died long ago, and I live. But You, O Lord, who ever livest, and in whom nothing dies (since before the world was, and indeed before all that can be called before, You exist, and are the God and Lord of all Your creatures; and with You fixedly abide the causes of all unstable things, the unchanging sources of all things changeable, and the eternal reasons of all things unreasoning and temporal), tell me, Your suppliant, O God; tell, O merciful One, Your miserable servant — tell me whether my infancy succeeded another age of mine which had at that time perished. Was it that which I passed in my mother's womb? For of that something has been made known to me, and I have myself seen women with child. And what, O God, my joy, preceded that life? Was I, indeed, anywhere, or anybody? For no one can tell me these things, neither father nor mother, nor the experience of others, nor my own memory. Do you laugh at me for asking such things, and command me to praise and confess You for what I know?

I give thanks to You, Lord of heaven and earth, giving praise to You for that my first being and infancy, of which I have no memory; for You have granted to man that from others he should come to conclusions as to himself, and that he should believe many things concerning himself on the authority of feeble women. Even then I had life and being; and as my infancy closed I was already seeking for signs by which my feelings might be made known to others. Whence could such a creature come but from You, O Lord? Or shall any man be skilful enough to fashion himself? Or is there any other vein by which being and life runs into us save this, that You, O Lord, hast made us, with whom being and life are one, because You Yourself art being and life in the highest? You are the highest, You change not, Malachi 3:6 neither in You does this present day come to an end, though it does end in You, since in You all such things are; for they would have no way of passing away unless You sustained them. And since Your years shall have no end, Your years are an ever present day. And how many of ours and our fathers' days have passed through this Your day, and received from it their measure and fashion of being, and others yet to come shall so receive and pass away! But You are the same; and all the things of tomorrow and the days yet to come, and all of yesterday and the days that are past, You will do today, You have done today. What is it to me if any understand not? Let him still rejoice and say, What is this? Let him rejoice even so, and rather love to discover in failing to discover, than in discovering not to discover You.

Chapter 7. He Shows by Example that Even Infancy is Prone to Sin.

Hearken, O God! Alas for the sins of men! Man says this, and You have compassion on him; for You created him, but did not create the sin that is in him. Who brings to my remembrance the sin of my infancy? For before You none is free from sin, not even the infant which has lived but a day upon the earth. Who brings this to my remembrance? Does not each little one, in whom I behold that which I do not remember of myself? In what, then, did I sin? Is it that I cried for the breast? If I should now so cry — not indeed for the breast, but for the food suitable to my years — I should be most justly laughed at and rebuked. What I then did deserved rebuke; but as I could not understand those who rebuked me, neither custom nor reason suffered me to be rebuked. For as we grow we root out and cast from us such habits. I have not seen any one who is wise, when purging John 15:2 anything cast away the good. Or was it good, even for a time, to strive to get by crying that which, if given, would be hurtful — to be bitterly indignant that those who were free and its elders, and those to whom it owed its being, besides many others wiser than it, who would not give way to the nod of its good pleasure, were not subject unto it — to endeavour to harm, by struggling as much as it could, because those commands were not obeyed which only could have been obeyed to its hurt? Then, in the weakness of the infant's limbs, and not in its will, lies its innocency. I myself have seen and known an infant to be jealous though it could not speak. It became pale, and cast bitter looks on its foster-brother. Who is ignorant of this? Mothers and nurses tell us that they appease these things by I know not what remedies; and may this be taken for innocence, that when the fountain of milk is flowing fresh and abundant, one who has need should not be allowed to share it, though needing that nourishment to sustain life? Yet we look leniently on these things, not because they are not faults, nor because the faults are small, but because they will vanish as age increases. For although you may allow these things now, you could not bear them with equanimity if found in an older person.

You, therefore, O Lord my God, who gave life to the infant, and a frame which, as we see, You have endowed with senses, compacted with limbs, beautified with form, and, for its general good and safety, hast introduced all vital energies — You command me to praise You for these things, to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praise unto Your name, O Most High; for You are a God omnipotent and good, though You had done nought but these things, which none other can do but You, who alone made all things, O You most fair, who made all things fair, and orders all according to Your law. This period, then, of my life, O Lord, of which I have no remembrance, which I believe in the word of others, and which I guess from other infants, it chagrins me — true though the guess be — to reckon in this life of mine which I lead in this world; inasmuch as, in the darkness of my forgetfulness, it is like to that which I passed in my mother's womb. But if I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me, where, I pray you, O my God, where, Lord, or when was I, Your servant, innocent? But behold, I pass by that time, for what have I to do with that, the memories of which I cannot recall?

Chapter 8. That When a Boy He Learned to Speak, Not by Any Set Method, But from the Acts and Words of His Parents.

Did I not, then, growing out of the state of infancy, come to boyhood, or rather did it not come to me, and succeed to infancy? Nor did my infancy depart (for whither went it?); and yet it did no longer abide, for I was no longer an infant that could not speak, but a chattering boy. I remember this, and I afterwards

observed how I first learned to speak, for my elders did not teach me words in any set method, as they did letters afterwards; but myself, when I was unable to say all I wished and to whomsoever I desired, by means of the whimperings and broken utterances and various motions of my limbs, which I used to enforce my wishes, repeated the sounds in my memory by the mind, O my God, which You gave me. When they called anything by name, and moved the body towards it while they spoke, I saw and gathered that the thing they wished to point out was called by the name they then uttered; and that they did mean this was made plain by the motion of the body, even by the natural language of all nations expressed by the countenance, glance of the eye, movement of other members, and by the sound of the voice indicating the affections of the mind, as it seeks, possesses, rejects, or avoids. So it was that by frequently hearing words, in duly placed sentences, I gradually gathered what things they were the signs of; and having formed my mouth to the utterance of these signs, I thereby expressed my will. Thus I exchanged with those about me the signs by which we express our wishes, and advanced deeper into the stormy fellowship of human life, depending the while on the authority of parents, and the beck of elders.

Chapter 9. Concerning the Hatred of Learning, the Love of Play, and the Fear of Being Whipped Noticeable in Boys: and of the Folly of Our Elders and Masters.

O my God! What miseries and mockeries did I then experience, when obedience to my teachers was set before me as proper to my boyhood, that I might flourish in this world, and distinguish myself in the science of speech, which should get me honour among men, and deceitful riches! After that I was put to school to get learning, of which I (worthless as I was) knew not what use there was; and yet, if slow to learn, I was flogged! For this was deemed praiseworthy by our forefathers; and many before us, passing the same course, had appointed beforehand for us these troublesome ways by which we were compelled to pass, multiplying labour and sorrow upon the sons of Adam. But we found, O Lord, men praying to You, and we learned from them to conceive of You, according to our ability, to be some Great One, who was able (though not visible to our senses) to hear and help us. For as a boy I began to pray to You, my help and my refuge, and in invoking You broke the bands of my tongue, and entreated You though little, with no little earnestness, that I might not be beaten at school. And when You heard me not, giving me not over to folly thereby, my elders, yea, and my own parents too, who wished me no ill, laughed at my stripes, my then great and grievous ill.

Is there any one, Lord, with so high a spirit, cleaving to You with so strong an affection — for even a kind of obtuseness may do that much — but is there, I say, any one who, by cleaving devoutly to You, is endowed with so great a courage that he can esteem lightly those racks and hooks, and varied tortures of the same sort, against which, throughout the whole world, men supplicate You with great fear, deriding those who most bitterly fear them, just as our parents derided the torments with which our masters punished us when we were boys? For we were no less afraid of our pains, nor did we pray less to You to avoid them; and yet we sinned, in writing, or reading, or reflecting upon our lessons less than was required of us. For we wanted not, O Lord, memory or capacity, of which, by Your will, we possessed enough for our age — but we delighted only in play; and we were punished for this by those

who were doing the same things themselves. But the idleness of our elders they call business, while boys who do the like are punished by those same elders, and yet neither boys nor men find any pity. For will any one of good sense approve of my being whipped because, as a boy, I played ball, and so was hindered from learning quickly those lessons by means of which, as a man, I should play more unbecomingly? And did he by whom I was beaten do other than this, who, when he was overcome in any little controversy with a co-tutor, was more tormented by anger and envy than I when beaten by a playmate in a match at ball?

Chapter 10. Through a Love of Ball-Playing and Shows, He Neglects His Studies and the Injunctions of His Parents.

And yet I erred, O Lord God, the Creator and Disposer of all things in Nature, — but of sin the Disposer only — I erred, O Lord my God, in doing contrary to the wishes of my parents and of those masters; for this learning which they (no matter for what motive) wished me to acquire, I might have put to good account afterwards. For I disobeyed them not because I had chosen a better way, but from a fondness for play, loving the honour of victory in the matches, and to have my ears tickled with lying fables, in order that they might itch the more furiously — the same curiosity beaming more and more in my eyes for the shows and sports of my elders. Yet those who give these entertainments are held in such high repute, that almost all desire the same for their children, whom they are still willing should be beaten, if so be these same games keep them from the studies by which they desire them to arrive at being the givers of them. Look down upon these things, O Lord, with compassion, and deliver us who now call upon You; deliver those also who do not call upon You, that they may call upon You, and that You may deliver them.

Chapter 11. Seized by Disease, His Mother Being Troubled, He Earnestly Demands Baptism, Which on Recovery is Postponed — His Father Not as Yet Believing in Christ.

Even as a boy I had heard of eternal life promised to us through the humility of the Lord our God condescending to our pride, and I was signed with the sign of the cross, and was seasoned with His salt even from the womb of my mother, who greatly trusted in You. You saw, O Lord, how at one time, while yet a boy, being suddenly seized with pains in the stomach, and being at the point of death — You saw, O my God, for even then You were my keeper, with what emotion of mind and with what faith I solicited from the piety of my mother, and of Your Church, the mother of us all, the baptism of Your Christ, my Lord and my God. On which, the mother of my flesh being much troubled — since she, with a heart pure in Your faith, travailed in birth Galatians 4:19 more lovingly for my eternal salvation — would, had I not quickly recovered, have without delay provided for my initiation and washing by Your life-giving sacraments, confessing You, O Lord Jesus, for the remission of sins. So my cleansing was deferred, as if I must needs, should I live, be further polluted; because, indeed, the guilt contracted by sin would, after baptism, be greater and more perilous. Thus I at that time believed with my mother and the whole house, except my father; yet he did not overcome the influence of my mother's piety in me so as to prevent my believing in Christ, as he had not yet believed in Him. For she was desirous that You, O my God, should be my Father rather than he; and in this You aided her to overcome her husband, to whom, though the better of the two, she yielded obedience, because in this she yielded obedience to You, who so commands.

I beseech You, my God, I would gladly know, if it be Your will, to what end my baptism was then deferred? Was it for my good that the reins were slackened, as it were, upon me for me to sin? Or were they not slackened? If not, whence comes it that it is still dinned into our ears on all sides, Let him alone, let him act as he likes, for he is not yet baptized? But as regards bodily health, no one exclaims, Let him be more seriously wounded, for he is not yet cured! How much better, then, had it been for me to have been cured at once; and then, by my own and my friends' diligence, my soul's restored health had been kept safe in Your keeping, who gave it! Better, in truth. But how numerous and great waves of temptation appeared to hang over me after my childhood! These were foreseen by my mother; and she preferred that the unformed clay should be exposed to them rather than the image itself.

Chapter 12. Being Compelled, He Gave His Attention to Learning; But Fully Acknowledges that This Was the Work of God.

But in this my childhood (which was far less dreaded for me than youth) I had no love of learning, and hated to be forced to it, yet was I forced to it notwithstanding; and this was well done towards me, but I did not well, for I would not have learned had I not been compelled. For no man does well against his will, even if that which he does be well. Neither did they who forced me do well, but the good that was done to me came from You, my God. For they considered not in what way I should employ what they forced me to learn, unless to satisfy the inordinate desires of a rich beggary and a shameful glory. But You, by whom the very hairs of our heads are numbered, Matthew 10:30 used for my good the error of all who pressed me to learn; and my own error in willing not to learn, You made use of for my punishment — of which I, being so small a boy and so great a sinner, was not unworthy. Thus by the instrumentality of those who did not well did You do well for me; and by my own sin You justly

punished me. For it is even as You have appointed, that every inordinate affection should bring its own punishment.

Chapter 13. He Delighted in Latin Studies and the Empty Fables of the Poets, But Hated the Elements of Literature and the Greek Language.

But what was the cause of my dislike of Greek literature, which I studied from my boyhood, I cannot even now understand. For the Latin I loved exceedingly — not what our first masters, but what the grammarians teach; for those primary lessons of reading, writing, and ciphering, I considered no less of a burden and a punishment than Greek. Yet whence was this unless from the sin and vanity of this life? For I was but flesh, a wind that passes away and comes not again. For those primary lessons were better, assuredly, because more certain; seeing that by their agency I acquired, and still retain, the power of reading what I find written, and writing myself what I will; while in the others I was compelled to learn about the wanderings of a certain Æneas, oblivious of my own, and to weep for Biab dead, because she slew herself for love; while at the same time I brooked with dry eyes my wretched self dying far from You, in the midst of those things, O God, my life.

For what can be more wretched than the wretch who pities not himself shedding tears over the death of Dido for love of Æneas, but shedding no tears over his own death in not loving You, O God, light of my heart, and bread of the inner mouth of my soul, and the power that weddest my mind with my innermost thoughts? I did not love You, and committed fornication against You; and those around me thus sinning cried, Well done! Well done! For the friendship of this world is fornication against You; James 4:4 and Well done! Well done! is cried until one feels ashamed not to be such a man. And for this I shed no tears, though I wept for Dido, who sought death at the sword's point, myself the while seeking the lowest of Your creatures — having forsaken You — earth tending to the earth; and if forbidden to read these things, how grieved would I feel that I was not permitted to read what grieved me. This sort of madness is considered a more honourable and more fruitful learning than that by which I learned to read and write.

But now, O my God, cry unto my soul; and let Your Truth say unto me, It is not so; it is not so; better much was that first teaching. For behold, I would rather forget the wanderings of Æneas, and all such things, than how to write and read. But it is true that over the entrance of the grammar school there hangs a veil; but this is not so much a sign of the majesty of the mystery, as of a covering for error. Let not them exclaim against me of whom I am no longer in fear, while I confess to You, my God, that which my soul desires, and acquiesce in reprehending my evil ways, that I may love Your good ways. Neither let those cry out against me who buy or sell grammar-learning. For if I ask them whether it be true, as the poet says, that Æneas once came to Carthage, the unlearned will reply that they do not know, the learned will deny it to be true. But if I ask with what letters the name Æneas is written, all who have learned this will answer truly, in accordance with the conventional understanding men have arrived at as to these signs. Again, if I should ask which, if forgotten, would cause the greatest inconvenience in our life, reading and writing, or these poetical fictions, who does not see what every one would answer who had not entirely forgotten himself? I erred, then, when as a boy I preferred those vain studies to those more profitable ones, or rather loved the one and hated the other. One and one are two, two and

two are four, this was then in truth a hateful song to me; while the wooden horse full of armed men, and the burning of Troy, and the spectral image of Creusa were a most pleasant spectacle of vanity.

Chapter 14. Why He Despised Greek Literature, and Easily Learned Latin.

But why, then, did I dislike Greek learning which was full of like tales? For Homer also was skilled in inventing similar stories, and is most sweetly vain, yet was he disagreeable to me as a boy. I believe Virgil, indeed, would be the same to Grecian children, if compelled to learn him, as I was Homer. The difficulty, in truth, the difficulty of learning a foreign language mingled as it were with gall all the sweetness of those fabulous Grecian stories. For not a single word of it did I understand, and to make me do so, they vehemently urged me with cruel threatenings and punishments. There was a time also when (as an infant) I knew no Latin; but this I acquired without any fear or tormenting, by merely taking notice, amid the blandishments of my nurses, the jests of those who smiled on me, and the sportiveness of those who toyed with me. I learned all this, indeed, without being urged by any pressure of punishment, for my own heart urged me to bring forth its own conceptions, which I could not do unless by learning words, not of those who taught me, but of those who talked to me; into whose ears, also, I brought forth whatever I discerned. From this it is sufficiently clear that a free curiosity has more influence in our learning these things than a necessity full of fear. But this last restrains the overflowings of that freedom, through Your laws, O God — Your laws, from the ferule of the schoolmaster to the trials of the martyr, being effective to mingle for us a salutary bitter, calling us back to Yourself from the pernicious delights which allure us from You.

Chapter 15. He Entreats God, that Whatever Useful Things He Learned as a Boy May Be Dedicated to Him.

Hear my prayer, O Lord; let not my soul faint under Your discipline, nor let me faint in confessing unto You Your mercies, whereby You have saved me from all my most mischievous ways, that You might become sweet to me beyond all the seductions which I used to follow; and that I may love You entirely, and grasp Your hand with my whole heart, and that You may deliver me from every temptation, even unto the end. For lo, O Lord, my King and my God, for Your service be whatever useful thing I learned as a boy — for Your service what I speak, and write, and count. For when I learned vain things, You granted me Your discipline; and my sin in taking delight in those vanities, You have forgiven me. I learned, indeed, in them many useful words; but these may be learned in things not vain, and that is the safe way for youths to walk in.

Chapter 16. He Disapproves of the Mode of Educating Youth, and He Points Out Why Wickedness is Attributed to the Gods by the Poets.

But woe unto you, you stream of human custom! Who shall stay your course? How long shall it be before you are dried up? How long will you carry down the sons of Eve into that huge and formidable ocean, which even they who are embarked on the cross (_lignum_) can scarce pass over? Do I not read in you of Jove the thunderer and adulterer? And the two verily he could not be; but it was that, while

the fictitious thunder served as a cloak, he might have warrant to imitate real adultery. Yet which of our gowned masters can lend a temperate ear to a man of his school who cries out and says: These were Homer's fictions; he transfers things human to the gods. I could have wished him to transfer divine things to us. But it would have been more true had he said: These are, indeed, his fictions, but he attributed divine attributes to sinful men, that crimes might not be accounted crimes, and that whosoever committed any might appear to imitate the celestial gods and not abandoned men.

And yet, you stream of hell, into you are cast the sons of men, with rewards for learning these things; and much is made of it when this is going on in the forum in the sight of laws which grant a salary over and above the rewards. And you beat against your rocks and roar, saying, Hence words are learned; hence eloquence is to be attained, most necessary to persuade people to your way of thinking, and to unfold your opinions. So, in truth, we should never have understood these words, golden shower, bosom, intrigue, highest heavens, and other words written in the same place, unless Terence had introduced a good-for-nothing youth upon the stage, setting up Jove as his example of lewdness:—

Viewing a picture, where the tale was drawn, Of Jove's descending in a golden shower To Danaë's bosom ... with a woman to intrigue. And see how he excites himself to lust, as if by celestial authority, when he says:— Great Jove, Who shakes the highest heavens with his thunder, And I, poor mortal man, not do the same! I did it, and with all my heart I did it.

Not one whit more easily are the words learned for this vileness, but by their means is the vileness perpetrated with more confidence. I do not blame the words, they being, as it were, choice and precious vessels, but the wine of error which was drunk in them to us by inebriated teachers; and unless we drank, we were beaten, without liberty of appeal to any sober judge. And yet, O my God — in whose presence I can now with security recall this — did I, unhappy one, learn these things willingly, and with delight, and for this was I called a boy of good promise.

Chapter 17. He Continues on the Unhappy Method of Training Youth in Literary Subjects.

Bear with me, my God, while I speak a little of those talents You have bestowed upon me, and on what follies I wasted them. For a lesson sufficiently disquieting to my soul was given me, in hope of praise, and fear of shame or stripes, to speak the words of Juno, as she grieved and sorrowed that she could not

Latium bar From all approaches of the Dardan king,

which I had heard Juno never uttered. Yet were we compelled to stray in the footsteps of these poetic fictions, and to turn that into prose which the poet had said in verse. And his speaking was most applauded in whom, according to the reputation of the persons delineated, the passions of anger and sorrow were most strikingly reproduced, and clothed in the most suitable language. But what is it to me, O my true Life, my God, that my declaiming was applauded above that of many who were my contemporaries and fellow-students? Behold, is not all this smoke and wind? Was there nothing else, too, on which I could exercise my wit and tongue? Your praise, Lord, Your praises might have supported the tendrils of my heart by Your Scriptures; so had it not been dragged away by these empty trifles, a shameful prey of the fowls of the air. For there is more than one way in which men sacrifice to the fallen angels.

Chapter 18. Men Desire to Observe the Rules of Learning, But Neglect the Eternal Rules of Everlasting Safety.

But what matter of surprise is it that I was thus carried towards vanity, and went forth from You, O my God, when men were proposed to me to imitate, who, should they in relating any acts of theirs — not in themselves evil— be guilty of a barbarism or solecism, when censured for it became confounded; but when they made a full and ornate oration, in well-chosen words, concerning their own licentiousness, and were applauded for it, they boasted? You see this, O Lord, and keepest silence, long-suffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth, as You are. Will You keep silence for ever? And even now You draw out of this vast deep the soul that seeks You and thirsts after Your delights, whose heart said to You, I have sought Your face, Your face, Lord, will I seek. For I was far from Your face, through my darkened

Romans 1:21 affections. For it is not by our feet, nor by change of place, that we either turn from You or return to You. Or, indeed, did that younger son look out for horses, or chariots, or ships, or fly away with visible wings, or journey by the motion of his limbs, that he might, in a far country, prodigally waste all that You gave him when he set out? A kind Father when You gave, and kinder still when he returned destitute! Luke 15:11-32 So, then, in wanton, that is to say, in darkened affections, lies distance from Your face.

Behold, O Lord God, and behold patiently, as You are wont to do, how diligently the sons of men observe the conventional rules of letters and syllables, received from those who spoke prior to them, and yet neglect the eternal rules of everlasting salvation received from You, insomuch that he who practises or teaches the hereditary rules of pronunciation, if, contrary to grammatical usage, he should say, without aspirating the first letter, a uman being, will offend men more than if, in opposition to Your commandments, he, a human being, were to hate a human being. As if, indeed, any man should feel that an enemy could be more destructive to him than that hatred with which he is excited against him, or that he could destroy more utterly him whom he persecutes than he destroys his own soul by his enmity. And of a truth, there is no science of letters more innate than the writing of conscience—that he is doing unto another what he himself would not suffer. How mysterious are You, who in silence dwellest on high, Isaiah 33:5 Thou God, the only great, who by an unwearied law dealest out the punishment of blindness to illicit desires! When a man seeking for the reputation of eloquence stands before a human judge while a thronging multitude surrounds him, inveighs against his enemy with the most fierce hatred, he takes most vigilant heed that his tongue slips not into grammatical error, but takes no heed lest through the fury of his spirit he cut off a man from his fellow-men.

These were the customs in the midst of which I, unhappy boy, was cast, and on that arena it was that I was more fearful of perpetrating a barbarism than, having done so, of envying those who had not. These things I declare and confess unto You, my God, for which I was applauded by them whom I then thought it my whole duty to please, for I did not perceive the gulf of infamy wherein I was cast away from Your eyes. For in Your eyes what was more infamous than I was already, displeasing even those like myself, deceiving with innumerable lies both tutor, and masters, and parents, from love of play, a desire to see frivolous spectacles, and a stage-stuck restlessness, to imitate them? Pilferings I committed from my parents' cellar and table, either enslaved by gluttony, or that I might have something to give to boys who sold me their play, who, though they sold it, liked it as well as I In this play, likewise, I often sought dishonest victories, I myself being conquered by the vain desire of pre-eminence. And what could I so little endure, or, if I detected it, censured I so violently, as the very things I did to others, and, when myself detected I was censured, preferred rather to quarrel than to yield? Is this the innocence of childhood? Nay, Lord, nay, Lord; I entreat Your mercy, O my God. For these same sins, as we grow older, are transferred from governors and masters, from nuts, and balls, and sparrows, to magistrates and kings, to gold, and lands, and slaves, just as the rod is succeeded by more severe chastisements. It was, then, the stature of childhood that You, O our King, approved of as an emblem of humility when You said: Of such is the kingdom of heaven.

But yet, O Lord, to You, most excellent and most good, Thou Architect and Governor of the universe, thanks had been due unto You, our God, even had You willed that I should not survive my boyhood. For

I existed even then; I lived, and felt, and was solicitous about my own well-being — a trace of that most mysterious unity from whence I had my being; I kept watch by my inner sense over the wholeness of my senses, and in these insignificant pursuits, and also in my thoughts on things insignificant, I learned to take pleasure in truth. I was averse to being deceived, I had a vigorous memory, was provided with the power of speech, was softened by friendship, shunned sorrow, meanness, ignorance. In such a being what was not wonderful and praiseworthy? But all these are gifts of my God; I did not give them to myself; and they are good, and all these constitute myself. Good, then, is He that made me, and He is my God; and before Him will I rejoice exceedingly for every good gift which, as a boy, I had. For in this lay my sin, that not in Him, but in His creatures — myself and the rest — I sought for pleasures, honours, and truths, falling thereby into sorrows, troubles, and errors. Thanks be to You, my joy, my pride, my confidence, my God — thanks be to You for Your gifts; but preserve them to me. For thus will You preserve me; and those things which You have given me shall be developed and perfected, and I myself shall be with You, for from You is my being.

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