

The Confessions (Book II)

Augustine of Hippo

Patristic · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Confession

STROMATA 66

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INTRODUCTION

The famous pear theft occupies only a few pages, but Augustine wrings from it an entire philosophy of evil. He and his friends steal fruit they don't want, for the pleasure of stealing. This, he argues, is the structure of all sin: not the satisfaction of desire but the love of transgression itself. Brief, intense, and philosophically unsettling. The shortest book in the Confessions — and among the most discussed.

He advances to puberty, and indeed to the early part of the sixteenth year of his age, in which, having abandoned his studies, he indulged in lustful pleasures, and, with his companions, committed theft.

Chapter 1. He Deplores the Wickedness of His Youth.

I Will now call to mind my past foulness, and the carnal corruptions of my soul, not because I love them, but that I may love You, O my God. For love of Your love do I it, recalling, in the very bitterness of my remembrance, my most vicious ways, that You may grow sweet to me — Thou sweetness without deception! Thou sweetness happy and assured!— and re-collecting myself out of that my dissipation, in which I was torn to pieces, while, turned away from You the One, I lost myself among many vanities. For I even longed in my youth formerly to be satisfied with worldly things, and I dared to grow wild again with various and shadowy loves; my form consumed away, and I became corrupt in Your eyes, pleasing myself, and eager to please in the eyes of men.

Chapter 2. Stricken with Exceeding Grief, He Remembers the Dissolute Passions in Which, in His Sixteenth Year, He Used to Indulge.

But what was it that I delighted in save to love and to be beloved? But I held it not in moderation, mind to mind, the bright path of friendship, but out of the dark concupiscence of the flesh and the effervescence of youth exhalations came forth which obscured and overcast my heart, so that I was unable to discern pure affection from unholy desire. Both boiled confusedly within me, and dragged away my unstable youth into the rough places of unchaste desires, and plunged me into a gulf of infamy. Your anger had overshadowed me, and I knew it not. I was become deaf by the rattling of the chains of my mortality, the punishment for my soul's pride; and I wandered farther from You, and You suffered Matthew 17:17

me; and I was tossed to and fro, and wasted, and poured out, and boiled over in my fornications, and You held Your peace, O Thou my tardy joy! Thou then held Your peace, and I wandered still farther from You, into more and more barren seed-plots of sorrows, with proud dejection and restless lassitude.

Oh for one to have regulated my disorder, and turned to my profit the fleeting beauties of the things around me, and fixed a bound to their sweetness, so that the tides of my youth might have spent themselves upon the conjugal shore, if so be they could not be tranquillized and satisfied within the object of a family, as Your law appoints, O Lord, — who thus formest the offspring of our death, being able also with a tender hand to blunt the thorns which were excluded from Your paradise! For Your omnipotency is not far from us even when we are far from You, else in truth ought I more vigilantly to have given heed to the voice from the clouds: Nevertheless, such shall have trouble in the flesh, but I spare you; 1 Corinthians 7:28 and, It is good for a man not to touch a woman; 1 Corinthians 7:1 and, He that is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but he that is married cares for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife. 1 Corinthians 7:32-33 I should, therefore, have listened more attentively to these words, and, being severed for the kingdom of heaven's sake, Matthew 19:12 I would with greater happiness have expected Your embraces.

But I, poor fool, seethed as does the sea, and, forsaking You, followed the violent course of my own stream, and exceeded all Your limitations; nor did I escape Your scourges. Isaiah 10:26 For what mortal can do so? But You were always by me, mercifully angry, and dashing with the bitterest vexations all my illicit pleasures, in order that I might seek pleasures free from vexation. But where I could meet with such except in You, O Lord, I could not find — except in You, who teachest by sorrow, Deuteronomy 32:39 and woundest us to heal us, and killest us that we may not die from You. 'Formest trouble in or as a precept.' Thou makest to us a precept out of trouble, so that trouble itself shall be a precept to us, *_i.e._* hast willed so to discipline and instruct those Thy sons, that they should not be without fear, lest they should love something else, and forget Thee, their true good."—S. *_ad loc._*—E. B. P}}--> Where was I, and how far was I exiled from the delights of Your house, in that sixteenth year of the age of my flesh, when the madness of lust— to the which human shamelessness grants full freedom, although forbidden by Your laws— held complete sway over me, and I resigned myself entirely to it? Those about me meanwhile took no care to save me from ruin by marriage, their sole care being that I should learn to make a powerful speech, and become a persuasive orator.

Chapter 3. Concerning His Father, a Freeman of Thagaste, the Assister of His Son's Studies, and on the Admonitions of His Mother on the Preservation of Chastity.

And for that year my studies were intermitted, while after my return from Madaura (a neighbouring city, whither I had begun to go in order to learn grammar and rhetoric), the expenses for a further residence at Carthage were provided for me; and that was rather by the determination than the means of my father, who was but a poor freeman of Thagaste. To whom do I narrate this? Not unto You, my God; but before You unto my own kind, even to that small part of the human race who may chance to light upon these my writings. And to what end? That I and all who read the same may reflect out of what depths we are to cry unto You. For what comes nearer to Your ears than a confessing heart and

a life of faith? For who did not extol and praise my father, in that he went even beyond his means to supply his son with all the necessities for a far journey for the sake of his studies? For many far richer citizens did not the like for their children. But yet this same father did not trouble himself how I grew towards You, nor how chaste I was, so long as I was skilful in speaking — however barren I was to Your tilling, O God, who art the sole true and good Lord of my heart, which is Your field.

But while, in that sixteenth year of my age, I resided with my parents, having holiday from school for a time (this idleness being imposed upon me by my parents' necessitous circumstances), the thorns of lust grew rank over my head, and there was no hand to pluck them out. Moreover when my father, seeing me at the baths, perceived that I was becoming a man, and was stirred with a restless youthfulness, he, as if from this anticipating future descendants, joyfully told it to my mother; rejoicing in that intoxication wherein the world so often forgets You, its Creator, and falls in love with Your creature instead of You, from the invisible wine of its own perversity turning and bowing down to the most infamous things. But in my mother's breast You had even now begun Your temple, and the commencement of Your holy habitation, whereas my father was only a catechumen as yet, and that but recently. She then started up with a pious fear and trembling; and, although I had not yet been baptized, she feared those crooked ways in which they walk who turn their back to You, and not their face. Jeremiah 2:27

Woe is me! And dare I affirm that You held Your peace, O my God, while I strayed farther from You? Did You then hold Your peace to me? And whose words were they but Yours which by my mother, Your faithful handmaid, You poured into my ears, none of which sank into my heart to make me do it? For she desired, and I remember privately warned me, with great solicitude, not to commit fornication; but above all things never to defile another man's wife. These appeared to me but womanish counsels, which I should blush to obey. But they were Yours, and I knew it not, and I thought that You held Your peace, and that it was she who spoke, through whom You held not Your peace to me, and in her person wast despised by me, her son, the son of Your handmaid, Your servant. But this I knew not; and rushed on headlong with such blindness, that among my equals I was ashamed to be less shameless, when I heard them pluming themselves upon their disgraceful acts, yea, and glorying all the more in proportion to the greatness of their baseness; and I took pleasure in doing it, not for the pleasure's sake only, but for the praise. What is worthy of dispraise but vice? But I made myself out worse than I was, in order that I might not be dispraised; and when in anything I had not sinned as the abandoned ones, I would affirm that I had done what I had not, that I might not appear abject for being more innocent, or of less esteem for being more chaste.

Behold with what companions I walked the streets of Babylon, in whose filth I was rolled, as if in cinnamon and precious ointments. And that I might cleave the more tenaciously to its very centre, my invisible enemy trod me down, and seduced me, I being easily seduced. Nor did the mother of my flesh, although she herself had ere this fled out of the midst of Babylon, Jeremiah 51:6 — progressing, however, but slowly in the skirts of it — in counselling me to chastity, so bear in mind what she had been told about me by her husband as to restrain in the limits of conjugal affection (if it could not be cut away to the quick) what she knew to be destructive in the present and dangerous in the future. But she took no heed of this, for she was afraid lest a wife should prove a hindrance and a clog to my hopes. Not those hopes of the future world, which my mother had in You; but the hope of learning, which both my

parents were too anxious that I should acquire — he, because he had little or no thought of You, and but vain thoughts for me — she, because she calculated that those usual courses of learning would not only be no drawback, but rather a furtherance towards my attaining You. For thus I conjecture, recalling as well as I can the dispositions of my parents. The reins, meantime, were slackened towards me beyond the restraint of due severity, that I might play, yea, even to dissoluteness, in whatsoever I fancied. And in all there was a mist, shutting out from my sight the brightness of Your truth, O my God; and my iniquity displayed itself as from very fatness.

Chapter 4. He Commits Theft with His Companions, Not Urged on by Poverty, But from a Certain Distaste of Well-Doing.

Theft is punished by Your law, O Lord, and by the law written in men's hearts, which iniquity itself cannot blot out. For what thief will suffer a thief? Even a rich thief will not allow him who is driven to it by want. Yet had I a desire to commit robbery, and did so, compelled neither by hunger, nor poverty through a distaste for well-doing, and a lustiness of iniquity. For I pilfered that of which I had already sufficient, and much better. Nor did I desire to enjoy what I pilfered, but the theft and sin itself. There was a pear-tree close to our vineyard, heavily laden with fruit, which was tempting neither for its color nor its flavour. To shake and rob this some of us wanton young fellows went, late one night (having, according to our disgraceful habit, prolonged our games in the streets until then), and carried away great loads, not to eat ourselves, but to fling to the very swine, having only eaten some of them; and to do this pleased us all the more because it was not permitted. Behold my heart, O my God; behold my heart, which You had pity upon when in the bottomless pit. Behold, now, let my heart tell You what it was seeking there, that I should be gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to evil but the evil itself. It was foul, and I loved it. I loved to perish. I loved my own error— not that for which I erred, but the error itself. Base soul, falling from Your firmament to utter destruction — not seeking anything through the shame but the shame itself!

Chapter 5. Concerning the Motives to Sin, Which are Not in the Love of Evil, But in the Desire of Obtaining the Property of Others.

There is a desirableness in all beautiful bodies, and in gold, and silver, and all things; and in bodily contact sympathy is powerful, and each other sense has his proper adaptation of body. Worldly honour has also its glory, and the power of command, and of overcoming; whence proceeds also the desire for revenge. And yet to acquire all these, we must not depart from You, O Lord, nor deviate from Your law. The life which we live here has also its peculiar attractiveness, through a certain measure of comeliness of its own, and harmony with all things here below. The friendships of men also are endeared by a sweet bond, in the oneness of many souls. On account of all these, and such as these, is sin committed; while through an inordinate preference for these goods of a lower kind, the better and higher are neglected — even You, our Lord God, Your truth, and Your law. For these meaner things have their delights, but not like my God, who has created all things; for in Him does the righteous delight, and He is the sweetness of the upright in heart.

When, therefore, we inquire why a crime was committed, we do not believe it, unless it appear that there might have been the wish to obtain some of those which we designated meaner things, or else a fear of losing them. For truly they are beautiful and comely, although in comparison with those higher and celestial goods they be abject and contemptible. A man has murdered another; what was his motive? He desired his wife or his estate; or would steal to support himself; or he was afraid of losing something of the kind by him; or, being injured, he was burning to be revenged. Would he commit murder without a motive, taking delight simply in the act of murder? Who would credit it? For as for that savage and brutal man, of whom it is declared that he was gratuitously wicked and cruel, there is yet a motive assigned. Lest through idleness, he says, hand or heart should grow inactive. And to what purpose? Why, even that, having once got possession of the city through that practice of wickedness, he might attain unto honours, empire, and wealth, and be exempt from the fear of the laws, and his difficult

circumstances from the needs of his family, and the consciousness of his own wickedness. So it seems that even Catiline himself loved not his own villainies, but something else, which gave him the motive for committing them.

Chapter 6. Why He Delighted in that Theft, When All Things Which Under the Appearance of Good Invite to Vice are True and Perfect in God Alone.

What was it, then, that I, miserable one, so doted on in you, you theft of mine, you deed of darkness, in that sixteenth year of my age? Beautiful you were not, since you were theft. But are you anything, that so I may argue the case with you? Those pears that we stole were fair to the sight, because they were Your creation, You fairest of all, Creator of all, You good God — God, the highest good, and my true good. Those pears truly were pleasant to the sight; but it was not for them that my miserable soul lusted, for I had abundance of better, but those I plucked simply that I might steal. For, having plucked them, I threw them away, my sole gratification in them being my own sin, which I was pleased to enjoy. For if any of these pears entered my mouth, the sweetener of it was my sin in eating it. And now, O Lord my God, I ask what it was in that theft of mine that caused me such delight; and behold it has no beauty in it — not such, I mean, as exists in justice and wisdom; nor such as is in the mind, memory, senses, and animal life of man; nor yet such as is the glory and beauty of the stars in their courses; or the earth, or the sea, teeming with incipient life, to replace, as it is born, that which decays; nor, indeed, that false and shadowy beauty which pertains to deceptive vices.

For thus does pride imitate high estate, whereas You alone art God, high above all. And what does ambition seek but honours and renown, whereas You alone are to be honoured above all, and renowned for evermore? The cruelty of the powerful wishes to be feared; but who is to be feared but God only, out of whose power what can be forced away or withdrawn — when, or where, or whither, or by whom? The enticements of the wanton would fain be deemed love; and yet is naught more enticing than Your charity, nor is anything loved more healthfully than that, Your truth, bright and beautiful above all. Curiosity affects a desire for knowledge, whereas it is You who supremely knows all things. Yea, ignorance and foolishness themselves are concealed under the names of ingenuousness and harmlessness, because nothing can be found more ingenuous than You; and what is more harmless, since it is a sinner's own works by which he is harmed? And sloth seems to long for rest; but what sure rest is there besides the Lord? Luxury would fain be called plenty and abundance; but You are the fullness and unfailing plenteousness of unfading joys. Prodigality presents a shadow of liberality; but You are the most lavish giver of all good. Covetousness desires to possess much; and You are the Possessor of all things. Envy contends for excellence; but what so excellent as You? Anger seeks revenge; who avenges more justly than You? Fear starts at unwonted and sudden chances which threaten things beloved, and is wary for their security; but what can happen that is unwonted or sudden to You? Or who can deprive You of what You love? Or where is there unshaken security save with You? Grief languishes for things lost in which desire had delighted itself, even because it would have nothing taken from it, as nothing can be from You.

Thus does the soul commit fornication when she turns away from You, and seeks without You what she cannot find pure and untainted until she returns to You. Thus all perversely imitate You who separate

themselves far from You and raise themselves up against You. But even by thus imitating You they acknowledge You to be the Creator of all nature, and so that there is no place whither they can altogether retire from You. What, then, was it that I loved in that theft? And wherein did I, even corruptedly and pervertedly, imitate my Lord? Did I wish, if only by artifice, to act contrary to Your law, because by power I could not, so that, being a captive, I might imitate an imperfect liberty by doing with impunity things which I was not allowed to do, in obscured likeness of Your omnipotency? Behold this servant of Yours, fleeing from his Lord, and following a shadow! O rottenness! O monstrosity of life and profundity of death! Could I like that which was unlawful only because it was unlawful?

Chapter 7. He Gives Thanks to God for the Remission of His Sins, and Reminds Every One that the Supreme God May Have Preserved Us from Greater Sins.

What shall I render unto the Lord, that while my memory recalls these things my soul is not appalled at them? I will love You, O Lord, and thank You, and confess unto Your name, Revelation 3:5 because You have put away from me these so wicked and nefarious acts of mine. To Your grace I attribute it, and to Your mercy, that You have melted away my sin as it were ice. To Your grace also I attribute whatsoever of evil I have not committed; for what might I not have committed, loving as I did the sin for the sin's sake? Yea, all I confess to have been pardoned me, both those which I committed by my own perverseness, and those which, by Your guidance, I committed not. Where is he who, reflecting upon his own infirmity, dares to ascribe his chastity and innocence to his own strength, so that he should love You the less, as if he had been in less need of Your mercy, whereby You forgive the transgressions of those that turn to You? For whosoever, called by You, obeyed Your voice, and shunned those things which he reads me recalling and confessing of myself, let him not despise me, who, being sick, was healed by that same Physician Luke 4:23 by whose aid it was that he was not sick, or rather was less sick. And for this let him love You as much, yea, all the more, since by whom he sees me to have been restored from so great a feebleness of sin, by Him he sees himself from a like feebleness to have been preserved.

Chapter 8. In His Theft He Loved the Company of His Fellow-Sinners.

What fruit had I then, Romans 6:21 wretched one, in those things which, when I remember them, cause me shame — above all in that theft, which I loved only for the theft's sake? And as the theft itself was nothing, all the more wretched was I who loved it. Yet by myself alone I would not have done it — I recall what my heart was — alone I could not have done it. I loved, then, in it the companionship of my accomplices with whom I did it. I did not, therefore, love the theft alone — yea, rather, it was that alone that I loved, for the companionship was nothing. What is the fact? Who is it that can teach me, but He who illuminates mine heart and searches out the dark corners thereof? What is it that has come into my mind to inquire about, to discuss, and to reflect upon? For had I at that time loved the pears I stole, and wished to enjoy them, I might have done so alone, if I could have been satisfied with the mere commission of the theft by which my pleasure was secured; nor needed I have provoked that

itching of my own passions, by the encouragement of accomplices. But as my enjoyment was not in those pears, it was in the crime itself, which the company of my fellow-sinners produced.

Chapter 9. It Was a Pleasure to Him Also to Laugh When Seriously Deceiving Others.

By what feelings, then, was I animated? For it was in truth too shameful; and woe was me who had it. But still what was it? Who can understand his errors? We laughed, because our hearts were tickled at the thought of deceiving those who little imagined what we were doing, and would have vehemently disapproved of it. Yet, again, why did I so rejoice in this, that I did it not alone? Is it that no one readily laughs alone? No one does so readily; but yet sometimes, when men are alone by themselves, nobody being by, a fit of laughter overcomes them when anything very droll presents itself to their senses or mind. Yet alone I would not have done it — alone I could not at all have done it. Behold, my God, the lively recollection of my soul is laid bare before You — alone I had not committed that theft, wherein what I stole pleased me not, but rather the act of stealing; nor to have done it alone would I have liked so well, neither would I have done it. O Friendship too unfriendly! You mysterious seducer of the soul, you greediness to do mischief out of mirth and wantonness, you craving for others' loss, without desire for my own profit or revenge; but when they say, Let us go, let us do it, we are ashamed not to be shameless.

Chapter 10. With God There is True Rest and Life Unchanging.

Who can unravel that twisted and tangled knottiness? It is foul. I hate to reflect on it. I hate to look on it. But you do I long for, O righteousness and innocence, fair and comely to all virtuous eyes, and of a satisfaction that never palls! With you is perfect rest, and life unchanging. He who enters into you enters into the joy of his Lord, Matthew 25:21 and shall have no fear, and shall do excellently in the most Excellent. I sank away from You, O my God, and I wandered too far from You, my stay, in my youth, and became to myself an unfruitful land.

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