

The Confessions (Book VIII)

Augustine of Hippo

Patristic · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Confession

STROMATA 72

Downloaded from The Stromata (thestromata.com). Free for personal, educational, and ministry use.

INTRODUCTION

The conversion. Augustine hears the stories of Victorinus and Anthony, feels the contrast with his own paralysis, and breaks down in a garden. A child's voice: take up and read. He opens Paul at random and reads Romans 13. "I had no wish to read more and no need to." The scene is one of the most famous in Western literature — and one of the most carefully constructed. Augustine has been circling this moment for seven books. The restraint of the telling makes it devastating.

He finally describes the thirty-second year of his age, the most memorable of his whole life, in which, being instructed by Simplicianus concerning the conversion of others, and the manner of acting, he is, after a severe struggle, renewed in his whole mind, and is converted unto God.

Chapter 1. He, Now Given to Divine Things, and Yet Entangled by the Lusts of Love, Consults Simplicianus in Reference to the Renewing of His Mind.

O My God, let me with gratitude remember and confess unto You Your mercies bestowed upon me. Let my bones be steeped in Your love, and let them say, Who is like You, O Lord? You have loosed my bonds, I will offer unto You the sacrifice of thanksgiving. And how You have loosed them I will declare; and all who worship You when they hear these things shall say: Blessed be the Lord in heaven and earth, great and wonderful is His name. Your words had stuck fast into my breast, and I was hedged round about by You on every side. Job 1:10 Of Your eternal life I was now certain, although I had seen it through a glass darkly. 1 Corinthians 13:12 Yet I no longer doubted that there was an incorruptible substance, from which was derived all other substance; nor did I now desire to be more certain of You, but more steadfast in You. As for my temporal life, all things were uncertain, and my heart had to be purged from the old leaven. 1 Corinthians 5:7 The Way, John 14:6 the Saviour Himself, was pleasant unto me, but as yet I disliked to pass through its straightness. And Thou put into my mind, and it seemed good in my eyes, to go unto Simplicianus, who appeared to me a faithful servant of Yours, and Your grace shone in him. I had also heard that from his very youth he had lived most devoted to You. Now he had grown into years, and by reason of so great age, passed in such zealous following of Your ways, he appeared to me likely to have gained much experience; and so in truth he had. Out of which experience

I desired him to tell me (setting before him my griefs) which would be the most fitting way for one afflicted as I was to walk in Your way.

For the Church I saw to be full, and one went this way, and another that. But it was displeasing to me that I led a secular life; yea, now that my passions had ceased to excite me as of old with hopes of honour and wealth, a very grievous burden it was to undergo so great a servitude. For, compared with Your sweetness, and the beauty of Your house, which I loved, those things delighted me no longer. But still very tenaciously was I held by the love of women; nor did the apostle forbid me to marry, although he exhorted me to something better, especially wishing that all men were as he himself was. 1 Corinthians 7:7 But I, being weak, made choice of the more agreeable place, and because of this alone was tossed up and down in all beside, faint and languishing with withering cares, because in other matters I was compelled, though unwilling, to agree to a married life, to which I was given up and enthralled. I had heard from the mouth of truth that there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake; but, says He, he that is able to receive it, let him receive it. Matthew 19:12 Vain, assuredly, are all men in whom the knowledge of God is not, and who could not, out of the good things which are seen, find out Him who is good. Wisdom 13:1 But I was no longer in that vanity; I had surmounted it, and by the united testimony of Your whole creation had found You, our Creator, and Your Word, God with You, and together with You and the Holy Ghost one God, by whom You created all things. There is yet another kind of impious men, who when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful. Romans 1:21 Into this also had I fallen; but Your right hand held me up, and bore me away, and You placed me where I might recover. For You have said to man, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; Job 28:28 and desire not to seem wise, Proverbs 3:7 because, Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. Romans 1:22 But I had now found the goodly pearl, which, selling all that I had, Matthew 13:46 I ought to have bought; and I hesitated.

Chapter 2. The Pious Old Man Rejoices that He Read Plato and the Scriptures, and Tells Him of the Rhetorician Victorinus Having Been Converted to the Faith Through the Reading of the Sacred Books.

To Simplicianus then I went — the father of Ambrose (at that time a bishop) in receiving Your grace, and whom he truly loved as a father. To him I narrated the windings of my error. But when I mentioned to him that I had read certain books of the Platonists, which Victorinus, sometime Professor of Rhetoric at Rome (who died a Christian, as I had been told), had translated into Latin, he congratulated me that I had not fallen upon the writings of other philosophers, which were full of fallacies and deceit, after the rudiments of the world, Colossians 2:8 whereas they, in many ways, led to the belief in God and His word. Then, to exhort me to the humility of Christ, hidden from the wise, and revealed to little ones, Matthew 11:25 he spoke of Victorinus himself, whom, while he was at Rome, he had known very intimately; and of him he related that about which I will not be silent. For it contains great praise of Your grace, which ought to be confessed unto You, how that most learned old man, highly skilled in all the liberal sciences, who had read, criticised, and explained so many works of the philosophers; the teacher of so many noble senators; who also, as a mark of his excellent discharge of his duties, had (which men of this world esteem a great honour) both merited and obtained a statue in the Roman

Forum, he — even to that age a worshipper of idols, and a participator in the sacrilegious rites to which almost all the nobility of Rome were wedded, and had inspired the people with the love of

The dog Anubis, and a medley crew Of monster gods \[who\] 'gainst Neptune stand in arms,
'Gainst Venus and Minerva, steel-clad Mars,

whom Rome once conquered, now worshipped, all which old Victorinus had with thundering eloquence defended so many years — he now blushed not to be the child of Your Christ, and an infant at Your fountain, submitting his neck to the yoke of humility, and subduing his forehead to the reproach of the Cross.

O Lord, Lord, who has bowed the heavens and come down, touched the mountains and they did smoke, by what means did You convey Yourself into that bosom? He used to read, as Simplicianus said, the Holy Scripture, most studiously sought after and searched into all the Christian writings, and said to Simplicianus, — not openly, but secretly, and as a friend — Know that I am a Christian. To which he replied, I will not believe it, nor will I rank you among the Christians unless I see you in the Church of Christ. Whereupon he replied derisively, Is it then the walls that make Christians? And this he often said, that he already was a Christian; and Simplidanus making the same answer, the conceit of the walls was by the other as often renewed. For he was fearful of offending his friends, proud demon-worshippers, from the height of whose Babylonian dignity, as from cedars of Lebanon which had not yet been broken by the Lord, he thought a storm of enmity would descend upon him. But after that, from reading and inquiry, he had derived strength, and feared lest he should be denied by Christ before the holy angels if he now was afraid to confess Him before men, Luke 9:26 and appeared to himself guilty of a great fault in being ashamed of the sacraments of the humility of Your word, and not being ashamed of the sacrilegious rites of those proud demons, whose pride he had imitated and their rites adopted, he became bold-faced against vanity, and shame-faced toward the truth, and suddenly and unexpectedly said to Simplicianus, — as he himself informed me — Let us go to the church; I wish to be made a Christian. But he, not containing himself for joy, accompanied him. And having been admitted to the first sacraments of instruction, he not long after gave in his name, that he might be regenerated by baptism — Rome marvelling, and the Church rejoicing. The proud saw, and were enraged; they gnashed with their teeth, and melted away! But the Lord God was the hope of Your servant, and He regarded not vanities and lying madness.

Finally, when the hour arrived for him to make profession of his faith (which at Rome they who are about to approach Your grace are wont to deliver from an elevated place, in view of the faithful people, in a set form of words learned by heart), the presbyters, he said, offered Victorinus to make his profession more privately, as the custom was to do to those who were likely, through bashfulness, to be afraid; but he chose rather to profess his salvation in the presence of the holy assembly. For it was not salvation that he taught in rhetoric, and yet he had publicly professed that. How much less, therefore, ought he, when pronouncing Your word, to dread Your meek flock, who, in the delivery of his own words, had not feared the mad multitudes! So, then, when he ascended to make his profession, all, as they recognised him, whispered his name one to the other, with a voice of congratulation. And who was there among them that did not know him? And there ran a low murmur through the mouths of all the

rejoicing multitude, Victorinus! Victorinus! Sudden was the burst of exultation at the sight of him; and suddenly were they hushed, that they might hear him. He pronounced the true faith with an excellent boldness, and all desired to take him to their very heart — yea, by their love and joy they took him there; such were the hands with which they took him.

Chapter 3. That God and the Angels Rejoice More on the Return of One Sinner Than of Many Just Persons.

Good God, what passed in man to make him rejoice more at the salvation of a soul despaired of, and delivered from greater danger, than if there had always been hope of him, or the danger had been less? For so Thou also, O merciful Father, rejoice over one sinner that repents, more than over ninety-nine just persons that need no repentance. And with much joyfulness do we hear, whenever we hear, how the lost sheep is brought home again on the Shepherd's shoulders, while the angels rejoice, and the drachma is restored to Your treasury, the neighbours rejoicing with the woman who found it; Luke 15:4-10 and the joy of the solemn service of Your house constrains to tears, when in Your house it is read of Your younger son that he was dead, and is alive again, and was lost, and is found. Luke 15:32 For You rejoice both in us and in Your angels, holy through holy charity. For You are ever the same; for all things which abide neither the same nor for ever, Thou ever know after the same manner.

What, then, passes in the soul when it more delights at finding or having restored to it the thing it loves than if it had always possessed them? Yea, and other things bear witness hereunto; and all things are full of witnesses, crying out, So it is. The victorious commander triumphs; yet he would not have conquered had he not fought, and the greater the peril of the battle, the more the rejoicing of the triumph. The storm tosses the voyagers, threatens shipwreck, and every one waxes pale at the approach of death; but sky and sea grow calm, and they rejoice much, as they feared much. A loved one is sick, and his pulse indicates danger; all who desire his safety are at once sick at heart: he recovers, though not able as yet to walk with his former strength, and there is such joy as was not before when he walked sound and strong. Yea, the very pleasures of human life — not those only which rush upon us unexpectedly, and against our wills, but those that are voluntary and designed — do men obtain by difficulties. There is no pleasure at all in eating and drinking unless the pains of hunger and thirst go before. And drunkards eat certain salt meats with the view of creating a troublesome heat, which the drink allaying causes pleasure. It is also the custom that the affianced bride should not immediately be given up, that the husband may not less esteem her whom, as betrothed, he longed not for.

This law obtains in base and accursed joy; in that joy also which is permitted and lawful; in the sincerity of honest friendship; and in Him who was dead, and lived again, had been lost, and was found. Luke 15:32 The greater joy is everywhere preceded by the greater pain. What means this, O Lord my God, when You are, an everlasting joy unto Your own self, and some things about You are ever rejoicing in You? What means this, that this portion of things thus ebbs and flows, alternately offended and reconciled? Is this the fashion of them, and is this all You have allotted to them, whereas from the highest heaven to the lowest earth, from the beginning of the world to its end, from the angel to the worm, from the first movement unto the last, You set each in its right place, and appointed each its proper seasons, everything good after its kind? Woe is me! How high are You in the highest, and how deep in the deepest! Thou withdrawest no whither, and scarcely do we _return_ to You.

Chapter 4. He Shows by the Example of Victorinus that There is More Joy in the Conversion of Nobles.

Haste, Lord, and act; stir us up, and call us back; inflame us, and draw us to You; stir us up, and grow sweet unto us; let us now love You, let us run after You. Song of Songs 1:4 Do not many men, out of a deeper hell of blindness than that of Victorinus, return unto You, and approach, and are enlightened, receiving that light, which they that receive, receive power from You to become Your sons? John 1:12 But if they be less known among the people, even they that know them joy less for them. For when many rejoice together, the joy of each one is the fuller in that they are incited and inflamed by one another. Again, because those that are known to many influence many towards salvation, and take the lead with many to follow them. And, therefore, do they also who preceded them much rejoice in regard to them, because they rejoice not in them alone. May it be averted that in Your tabernacle the persons of the rich should be accepted before the poor, or the noble before the ignoble; since rather You have chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty and base things of the world, and things which are despised, have You chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to naught things that are. 1 Corinthians 1:27-28 And yet, even that least of the apostles, 1 Corinthians 15:9 by whose

tongue You sound out these words, when Paulus the proconsul Acts 13:12 — his pride overcome by the apostle's warfare — was made to pass under the easy yoke Matthew 11:30 of Your Christ, and became a provincial of the great King, — he also, instead of Saul, his former name, desired to be called Paul, in testimony of so great a victory. For the enemy is more overcome in one of whom he has more hold, and by whom he has hold of more. But the proud has he more hold of by reason of their nobility; and by them of more, by reason of their authority. By how much the more welcome, then, was the heart of Victorinus esteemed, which the devil had held as an unassailable retreat, and the tongue of Victorinus, with which mighty and cutting weapon he had slain many; so much the more abundantly should Your sons rejoice, seeing that our King has bound the strong man, Matthew 12:29 and they saw his vessels taken from him and cleansed, and made meet for Your honour, and become serviceable for the Lord unto every good work. 2 Timothy 2:21

Chapter 5. Of the Causes Which Alienate Us from God.

But when that man of Yours, Simplicianus, related this to me about Victorinus, I burned to imitate him; and it was for this end he had related it. But when he had added this also, that in the time of the Emperor Julian, there was a law made by which Christians were forbidden to teach grammar and oratory, and he, in obedience to this law, chose rather to abandon the wordy school than Your word, by which You make eloquent the tongues of the dumb, Wisdom 10:21 — he appeared to me not more brave than happy, in having thus discovered an opportunity of waiting on You only, which thing I was sighing for, thus bound, not with the irons of another, but my own iron will. My will was the enemy master of, and thence had made a chain for me and bound me. Because of a perverse will was lust made; and lust indulged in became custom; and custom not resisted became necessity. By which links, as it were, joined together (whence I term it a chain), did a hard bondage hold me enthralled. givest away thy strength to resist him in the rest; when the hem is worn, the whole garment will ravel out, if it be not mended by timely repentance. See Müller, *Lehre von der Sünde*, book v., where the beginnings and alarming progress of evil in the soul are graphically described. See 9JKLJKLsec. 18, note, below}}--> But that new will which had begun to develope in me, freely to worship You, and to wish to enjoy You, O God, the only sure enjoyment, was not able as yet to overcome my former wilfulness, made strong by long indulgence. Thus did my two wills, one old and the other new, one carnal, the other spiritual, contend within me; and by their discord they unstrung my soul.

Thus came I to understand, from my own experience, what I had read, how that the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. Galatians 5:17 I verily lusted both ways; yet more in that which I approved in myself, than in that which I disapproved in myself. For in this last it was now rather not I, Romans 7:20 because in much I rather suffered against my will than did it willingly. And yet it was through me that custom became more combative against me, because I had come willingly whither I willed not. And who, then, can with any justice speak against it, when just punishment follows the sinner? Nor had I now any longer my wonted excuse, that as yet I hesitated to be above the world and serve You, because my perception of the truth was uncertain; for now it was certain. But I, still bound to the earth, refused to be Your soldier; and was as much afraid of being freed from all embarrassments, as we ought to fear to be embarrassed.

Thus with the baggage of the world was I sweetly burdened, as when in slumber; and the thoughts wherein I meditated upon You were like the efforts of those desiring to awake, who, still overpowered with a heavy drowsiness, are again steeped therein. And as no one desires to sleep always, and in the sober judgment of all waking is better, yet does a man generally defer to shake off drowsiness, when there is a heavy lethargy in all his limbs, and, though displeased, yet even after it is time to rise with pleasure yields to it, so was I assured that it were much better for me to give up myself to Your charity, than to yield myself to my own cupidity; but the former course satisfied and vanquished me, the latter pleased me and fettered me. Nor had I anything to answer You calling to me, Awake, you that sleep, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light. Ephesians 5:14 And to You showing me on every side, that what Thou said was true, I, convicted by the truth, had nothing at all to reply, but the drawling and drowsy words: Presently, lo, presently; Leave me a little while. But presently, presently, had no present; and my leave me a little while went on for a long while. In vain did I delight in Your law after the inner man, when another law in my members warred against the law of my mind, and brought me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. For the law of sin is the violence of custom, whereby the mind is drawn and held, even against its will; deserving to be so held in that it so willingly falls into it. O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death but Your grace only, through Jesus Christ our Lord?

Chapter 6. Pontitianus' Account of Antony, the Founder of Monachism, and of Some Who Imitated Him.

And how, then, Thou delivered me out of the bonds of carnal desire, wherewith I was most firmly fettered, and out of the drudgery of worldly business, will I now declare and confess unto Your name, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amid increasing anxiety, I was transacting my usual affairs, and daily sighing unto You. I resorted as frequently to Your church as the business, under the burden of which I groaned, left me free to do. Alypius was with me, being after the third sitting disengaged from his legal occupation, and awaiting further opportunity of selling his counsel, as I was wont to sell the power of speaking, if it can be supplied by teaching. But Nebridius had, on account of our friendship, consented to teach under Verecundus, a citizen and a grammarian of Milan, and a very intimate friend of us all; who vehemently desired, and by the right of friendship demanded from our company, the faithful aid he greatly stood in need of. Nebridius, then, was not drawn to this by any desire of gain (for he could have made much more of his learning had he been so inclined), but, as a most sweet and kindly friend, he would not be wanting in an office of friendliness, and slight our request. But in this he acted very discreetly, taking care not to become known to those personages whom the world esteems great; thus avoiding distraction of mind, which he desired to have free and at leisure as many hours as possible, to search, or read, or hear something concerning wisdom.

Upon a certain day, then, Nebridius being away (why, I do not remember), lo, there came to the house to see Alypius and me, Pontitianus, a countryman of ours, in so far as he was an African, who held high office in the emperor's court. What he wanted with us I know not, but we sat down to talk together, and it fell out that upon a table before us, used for games, he noticed a book; he took it up, opened it, and, contrary to his expectation, found it to be the Apostle Paul — for he imagined it to be one of those books which I was wearing myself out in teaching. At this he looked up at me smilingly, and expressed his delight and wonder that he had so unexpectedly found this book, and this only, before my eyes. For he was both a Christian and baptized, and often prostrated himself before You our God in the church, in constant and daily prayers. When, then, I had told him that I bestowed much pains upon these writings, a conversation ensued on his speaking of Antony, the Egyptian monk, whose name was in high repute among Your servants, though up to that time not familiar to us. When he came to know this, he lingered on that topic, imparting to us a knowledge of this man so eminent, and marvelling at our ignorance. But we were amazed, hearing Your wonderful works most fully manifested in times so recent, and almost in our own, wrought in the true faith and the Catholic Church. We all wondered — we, that they were so great, and he, that we had never heard of them.

From this his conversation turned to the companies in the monasteries, and their manners so fragrant unto You, and of the fruitful deserts of the wilderness, of which we knew nothing. And there was a monastery at Milan full of good brethren, without the walls of the city, under the fostering care of Ambrose, and we were ignorant of it. He went on with his relation, and we listened intently and in silence. He then related to us how on a certain afternoon, at Triers, when the emperor was taken up with seeing the Circensian games, he and three others, his comrades, went out for a walk in the gardens close to the city walls, and there, as they chanced to walk two and two, one strolled away with him, while the other two went by themselves; and these, in their rambling, came upon a certain cottage inhabited by some of Your servants, poor in spirit, of whom is the kingdom of heaven, where they found a book in which was written the life of Antony. This one of them began to read, marvel at, and be inflamed by it; and in the reading, to meditate on embracing such a life, and giving up his worldly employments to serve You. And these were of the body called Agents for Public Affairs. Then, suddenly being overwhelmed with a holy love and a sober sense of shame, in anger with himself, he cast his eyes upon his friend, exclaiming, Tell me, I entreat you, what end we are striving for by all these labours of ours. What is our aim? What is our motive in doing service? Can our hopes in court rise higher than to be ministers of the emperor? And in such a position, what is there not brittle, and fraught with danger, and by how many dangers arrive we at greater danger? And when arrive we there? But if I desire to become a friend of God, behold, I am even now made it. Thus spoke he, and in the pangs of the travail of the new life, he turned his eyes again upon the page and continued reading, and was inwardly changed where Thou saw, and his mind was divested of the world, as soon became evident; for as he read, and the surging of his heart rolled along, he raged awhile, discerned and resolved on a better course, and now, having become Yours, he said to his friend, Now have I broken loose from those hopes of ours, and am determined to serve God; and this, from this hour, in this place, I enter upon. If you are reluctant to imitate me, hinder me not. The other replied that he would cleave to him, to share in so great a reward and so great a service. Thus both of them, being now Yours, were building a tower at the necessary cost, Luke 14:26-35 — of forsaking all that they had and following You. Then

Pontitianus, and he that had walked with him through other parts of the garden, came in search of them to the same place, and having found them, reminded them to return as the day had declined. But they, making known to him their resolution and purpose, and how such a resolve had sprung up and become confirmed in them, entreated them not to molest them, if they refused to join themselves unto them. But the others, no whit changed from their former selves, did yet (as he said) bewail themselves, and piously congratulated them, recommending themselves to their prayers; and with their hearts inclining towards earthly things, returned to the palace. But the other two, setting their affections upon heavenly things, remained in the cottage. And both of them had affianced brides, who, when they heard of this, dedicated also their virginity unto God.

Chapter 7. He Deplores His Wretchedness, that Having Been Born Thirtty-Two Years, He Had Not Yet Found Out the Truth.

Such was the story of Pontitianus. But You, O Lord, while he was speaking, turned me towards myself, taking me from behind my back, where I had placed myself while unwilling to exercise self-scrutiny; and Thou set me face to face with myself, that I might behold how foul I was, and how crooked and sordid, bespotted and ulcerous. And I beheld and loathed myself; and whither to fly from myself I discovered not. And if I sought to turn my gaze away from myself, he continued his narrative, and You again opposed me unto myself, and thrust me before my own eyes, that I might discover my iniquity, and hate it. I had known it, but acted as though I knew it not — winked at it, and forgot it.

But now, the more ardently I loved those whose healthful affections I heard tell of, that they had given up themselves wholly to You to be cured, the more did I abhor myself when compared with them. For many of my years (perhaps twelve) had passed away since my nineteenth, when, on the reading of Cicero's *_Hortensius_*, I was roused to a desire for wisdom; and still I was delaying to reject mere worldly happiness, and to devote myself to search out that whereof not the finding alone, but the bare search, ought to have been preferred before the treasures and kingdoms of this world, though already found, and before the pleasures of the body, though encompassing me at my will. But I, miserable young man, supremely miserable even in the very outset of my youth, had entreated chastity of You, and said, Grant me chastity and continency, but not yet. For I was afraid lest You should hear me soon, and soon deliver me from the disease of concupiscence, which I desired to have satisfied rather than extinguished. And I had wandered through perverse ways in a sacrilegious superstition; not indeed assured thereof, but preferring that to the others, which I did not seek religiously, but opposed maliciously.

And I had thought that I delayed from day to day to reject worldly hopes and follow You only, because there did not appear anything certain whereunto to direct my course. And now had the day arrived in which I was to be laid bare to myself, and my conscience was to chide me. Where are you, O my tongue? You said, verily, that for an uncertain truth you were not willing to cast off the baggage of vanity. Behold, now it is certain, and yet does that burden still oppress you; whereas they who neither have so worn themselves out with searching after it, nor yet have spent ten years and more in thinking thereon, have had their shoulders unburdened, and gotten wings to fly away. Thus was I inwardly consumed and mightily confounded with an horrible shame, while Pontitianus was relating these things. And he, having finished his story, and the business he came for, went his way. And unto myself, what said I not

within myself? With what scourges of rebuke lashed I not my soul to make it follow me, struggling to go after You! Yet it drew back; it refused, and exercised not itself. All its arguments were exhausted and confuted. There remained a silent trembling; and it feared, as it would death, to be restrained from the flow of that custom whereby it was wasting away even to death.

Chapter 8. The Conversation with Alypius Being Ended, He Retires to the Garden, Whither His Friend Follows Him.

In the midst, then, of this great strife of my inner dwelling, which I had strongly raised up against my soul in the chamber of my heart, troubled both in mind and countenance, I seized upon Alypius, and exclaimed: What is wrong with us? What is this? What did you hear? The unlearned start up and 'take' heaven, Matthew 11:12 and we, with our learning, but wanting heart, see where we wallow in flesh and blood! Because others have preceded us, are we ashamed to follow, and not rather ashamed at not following? Some such words I gave utterance to, and in my excitement flung myself from him, while he gazed upon me in silent astonishment. For I spoke not in my wonted tone, and my brow, cheeks, eyes, color, tone of voice, all expressed my emotion more than the words. There was a little garden belonging to our lodging, of which we had the use, as of the whole house; for the master, our landlord, did not live there. Thither had the tempest within my breast hurried me, where no one might impede the fiery struggle in which I was engaged with myself, until it came to the issue that Thou knew, though I did not. But I was mad that I might be whole, and dying that I might have life, knowing what evil thing I was, but not knowing what good thing I was shortly to become. Into the garden, then, I retired, Alypius following my steps. For his presence was no bar to my solitude; or how could he desert me so troubled? We sat down at as great a distance from the house as we could. I was disquieted in spirit, being most impatient with myself that I entered not into Your will and covenant, O my God, which all my bones cried out unto me to enter, extolling it to the skies. And we enter not therein by ships, or chariots, or feet, no, nor by going so far as I had come from the house to that place where we were sitting. For not to go only, but to enter there, was naught else but to will to go, but to will it resolutely and thoroughly; not to stagger and sway about this way and that, a changeable and half-wounded will, wrestling, with one part falling as another rose.

Finally, in the very fever of my irresolution, I made many of those motions with my body which men sometimes desire to do, but cannot, if either they have not the limbs, or if their limbs be bound with fetters, weakened by disease, or hindered in any other way. Thus, if I tore my hair, struck my forehead, or if, entwining my fingers, I clasped my knee, this I did because I willed it. But I might have willed and not done it, if the power of motion in my limbs had not responded. So many things, then, I did, when to have the will was not to have the power, and I did not that which both with an unequalled desire I longed more to do, and which shortly when I should will I should have the power to do; because shortly when I should will, I should will thoroughly. For in such things the power was one with the will, and to will was to do, and yet was it not done; and more readily did the body obey the slightest wish of the soul in the moving its limbs at the order of the mind, than the soul obeyed itself to accomplish in the will alone this its great will.

Chapter 9. That the Mind Commands the Mind, But It Wills Not Entirely.

Whence is this monstrous thing? And why is it? Let Your mercy shine on me, that I may inquire, if so be the hiding-places of man's punishment, and the darkest contritions of the sons of Adam, may perhaps answer me. Whence is this monstrous thing? And why is it? The mind commands the body, and it obeys immediately; the mind commands itself, and is resisted. The mind commands the hand to be moved, and such readiness is there that the command is scarce to be distinguished from the obedience. Yet the mind is mind, and the hand is body. The mind commands the mind to will, and yet, though it be itself, it obeys not. Whence this monstrous thing? And why is it? I repeat, it commands itself to will, and would not give the command unless it willed; yet is not that done which it commands. But it wills not entirely; therefore it commands not entirely. For so far forth it commands, as it wills; and so far forth is the thing commanded not done, as it wills not. For the will commands that there be a will;— not another, but itself. But it does not command entirely, therefore that is not which it commands. For were it entire, it would not even command it to be, because it would already be. It is, therefore, no monstrous thing partly to will, partly to be unwilling, but an infirmity of the mind, that it does not wholly rise, sustained by truth, pressed down by custom. And so there are two wills, because one of them is not entire; and the one is supplied with what the other needs.

Chapter 10. He Refutes the Opinion of the Manichæans as to Two Kinds of Minds — One Good and the Other Evil.

Let them perish from Your presence, O God, as vain talkers and deceivers Titus 1:10 of the soul do perish, who, observing that there were two wills in deliberating, affirm that there are two kinds of minds in us — one good, the other evil. They themselves verily are evil when they hold these evil opinions; and they shall become good when they hold the truth, and shall consent unto the truth, that Your apostle may say unto them, You were sometimes darkness, but now are you light in the Lord. Ephesians 5:8 But, they, desiring to be light, not in the Lord, but in themselves, conceiving the nature of the soul to be the same as that which God is, are made more gross darkness; for that through a shocking arrogancy they went farther from You, the true Light, which lights every man that comes into the world. John 1:9 Take heed what you say, and blush for shame; draw near unto Him and be lightened, and your faces shall not be ashamed. I, when I was deliberating upon serving the Lord my God now, as I had long purposed — I it was who willed, I who was unwilling. It was I, even I myself. I neither willed entirely, nor was entirely unwilling. Therefore was I at war with myself, and destroyed by myself. And this destruction overtook me against my will, and yet showed not the presence of another mind, but the punishment of my own. Now, then, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me, Romans 7:17 — the punishment of a more unconfined sin, in that I was a son of Adam.

For if there be as many contrary natures as there are conflicting wills, there will not now be two natures only, but many. If any one deliberate whether he should go to their conventicle, or to the theatre, those men at once cry out, Behold, here are two natures — one good, drawing this way, another bad, drawing back that way; for whence else is this indecision between conflicting wills? But I reply that both are bad — that which draws to them, and that which draws back to the theatre. But they believe not that will to be other than good which draws to them. Supposing, then, one of us should deliberate, and through the conflict of his two wills should waver whether he should go to the theatre or to our church, would

not these also waver what to answer? For either they must confess, which they are not willing to do, that the will which leads to our church is good, as well as that of those who have received and are held by the mysteries of theirs, or they must imagine that there are two evil natures and two evil minds in one man, at war one with the other; and that will not be true which they say, that there is one good and another bad; or they must be converted to the truth, and no longer deny that where any one deliberates, there is one soul fluctuating between conflicting wills.

Let them no more say, then, when they perceive two wills to be antagonistic to each other in the same man, that the contest is between two opposing minds, of two opposing substances, from two opposing principles, the one good and the other bad. For Thou, O true God, disprove, check, and convince them; like as when both wills are bad, one deliberates whether he should kill a man by poison, or by the sword; whether he should take possession of this or that estate of another's, when he cannot both; whether he should purchase pleasure by prodigality, or retain his money by covetousness; whether he should go to the circus or the theatre, if both are open on the same day; or, thirdly, whether he should rob another man's house, if he have the opportunity; or, fourthly, whether he should commit adultery, if at the same time he have the means of doing so — all these things concurring in the same point of time, and all being equally longed for, although impossible to be enacted at one time. For they rend the mind amid four, or even (among the vast variety of things men desire) more antagonistic wills, nor do they yet affirm that there are so many different substances. Thus also is it in wills which are good. For I ask them, is it a good thing to have delight in reading the apostle, or good to have delight in a sober psalm, or good to discourse on the gospel? To each of these they will answer, It is good. What, then, if all equally delight us, and all at the same time? Do not different wills distract the mind, when a man is deliberating which he should rather choose? Yet are they all good, and are at variance until one be fixed upon, whither the whole united will may be borne, which before was divided into many. Thus, also, when above eternity delights us, and the pleasure of temporal good holds us down below, it is the same soul which wills not that or this with an entire will, and is therefore torn asunder with grievous perplexities, while out of truth it prefers that, but out of custom forbears not this.

Chapter 11. In What Manner the Spirit Struggled with the Flesh, that It Might Be Freed from the Bondage of Vanity.

Thus was I sick and tormented, accusing myself far more severely than was my wont, tossing and turning me in my chain till that was utterly broken, whereby I now was but slightly, but still was held. And You, O Lord, pressed upon me in my inward parts by a severe mercy, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame, lest I should again give way, and that same slender remaining tie not being broken off, it should recover strength, and enchain me the faster. For I said mentally, Lo, let it be done now, let it be done now. And as I spoke, I all but came to a resolve. I all but did it, yet I did it not. Yet fell I not back to my old condition, but took up my position hard by, and drew breath. And I tried again, and wanted but very little of reaching it, and somewhat less, and then all but touched and grasped it; and yet came not at it, nor touched, nor grasped it, hesitating to die unto death, and to live unto life; and the worse, whereto I had been habituated, prevailed more with me than the better, which I had not tried. And the

very moment in which I was to become another man, the nearer it approached me, the greater horror did it strike into me; but it did not strike me back, nor turn me aside, but kept me in suspense.

The very toys of toys, and vanities of vanities, my old mistresses, still enthralled me; they shook my fleshly garment, and whispered softly, Do you part with us? And from that moment shall we no more be with you for ever? And from that moment shall not this or that be lawful for you for ever? And what did they suggest to me in the words this or that? What is it that they suggested, O my God? Let Your mercy avert it from the soul of Your servant. What impurities did they suggest! What shame! And now I far less than half heard them, not openly showing themselves and contradicting me, but muttering, as it were, behind my back, and furtively plucking me as I was departing, to make me look back upon them. Yet they did delay me, so that I hesitated to burst and shake myself free from them, and to leap over whither I was called — an unruly habit saying to me, Do you think you can live without them?

But now it said this very faintly; for on that side towards which I had set my face, and whither I trembled to go, did the chaste dignity of Continence appear unto me, cheerful, but not dissolutely gay, honestly alluring me to come and doubt nothing, and extending her holy hands, full of a multiplicity of good examples, to receive and embrace me. There were there so many young men and maidens, a multitude of youth and every age, grave widows and ancient virgins, and Continence herself in all, not barren, but a fruitful mother of children of joys, by You, O Lord, her Husband. And she smiled on me with an encouraging mockery, as if to say, Can you not do what these youths and maidens can? Or can one or other do it of themselves, and not rather in the Lord their God? The Lord their God gave me unto them. Why do you stand in your own strength, and so standest not? Cast yourself upon Him; fear not, He will not withdraw that you should fall; cast yourself upon Him without fear, He will receive you, and heal you. And I blushed beyond measure, for I still heard the muttering of those toys, and hung in suspense. And she again seemed to say, Shut up your ears against those unclean members of yours upon the earth, that they may be mortified. Colossians 3:5 They tell you of delights, but not as does the law of the Lord your God. This controversy in my heart was naught but self against self. But Alypius, sitting close by my side, awaited in silence the result of my unwonted emotion.

Chapter 12. Having Prayed to God, He Pours Forth a Shower of Tears, And, Admonished by a Voice, He Opens the Book and Reads the Words in Rom. XIII. 13; By Which, Being Changed in His Whole Soul, He Discloses the Divine Favour to His Friend and His Mother.

But when a profound reflection had, from the secret depths of my soul, drawn together and heaped up all my misery before the sight of my heart, there arose a mighty storm, accompanied by as mighty a shower of tears. Which, that I might pour forth fully, with its natural expressions, I stole away from Alypius; for it suggested itself to me that solitude was fitter for the business of weeping. So I retired to such a distance that even his presence could not be oppressive to me. Thus was it with me at that time, and he perceived it; for something, I believe, I had spoken, wherein the sound of my voice appeared choked with weeping, and in that state had I risen up. He then remained where we had been sitting, most completely astonished. I flung myself down, how, I know not, under a certain fig-tree, giving free course to my tears, and the streams of my eyes gushed out, an acceptable sacrifice unto You. 1 Peter 2:5

And, not indeed in these words, yet to this effect, spoke I much unto You —But You, O Lord, how long? How long, Lord? Will You be angry for ever? Oh, remember not against us former iniquities; for I felt that I was enthralled by them. I sent up these sorrowful cries —How long, how long? Tomorrow, and tomorrow? Why not now? Why is there not this hour an end to my uncleanness?

I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo, I heard the voice as of a boy or girl, I know not which, coming from a neighbouring house, chanting, and oft repeating, Take up and read; take up and read. Immediately my countenance was changed, and I began most earnestly to consider whether it was usual for children in any kind of game to sing such words; nor could I remember ever to have heard the like. So, restraining the torrent of my tears, I rose up, interpreting it no other way than as a command to me from Heaven to open the book, and to read the first chapter I should light upon. For I had heard of Antony, that, accidentally coming in while the gospel was being read, he received the admonition as if what was read were addressed to him, Go and sell that you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me. Matthew 19:21 And by such oracle was he immediately converted unto You. So quickly I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting; for there had I put down the volume of the apostles, when I rose thence. I grasped, opened, and in silence read that paragraph on which my eyes first fell — Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof. Romans 13:13-14 No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended — by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart — all the gloom of doubt vanished away.

Closing the book, then, and putting either my finger between, or some other mark, I now with a tranquil countenance made it known to Alypius. And he thus disclosed to me what was wrought in him, which I knew not. He asked to look at what I had read. I showed him; and he looked even further than I had read, and I knew not what followed. This it was, verily, Him that is weak in the faith, receive; Romans 14:1 which he applied to himself, and discovered to me. By this admonition was he strengthened; and by a good resolution and purpose, very much in accord with his character (wherein, for the better, he was always far different from me), without any restless delay he joined me. Thence we go in to my mother. We make it known to her — she rejoices. We relate how it came to pass — she leaps for joy, and triumphs, and blesses You, who art able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think; Ephesians 3:20 for she perceived You to have given her more for me than she used to ask by her pitiful and most doleful groanings. For Thou so converted me unto Yourself, that I sought neither a wife, nor any other of this world's hopes, — standing in that rule of faith in which Thou, so many years before, had showed me unto her in a vision. And you turned her grief into a gladness, much more plentiful than she had desired, and much dearer and chaster than she used to crave, by having grandchildren of my body.

Source: Translated by J.G. Pilkington. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.

Text sourced from New Advent (newadvent.org). Original translation public domain (pre-1900). Accessed April 2026.

Translation: J.G. Pilkington translation, 1887. J.G. Pilkington (1821–1870) — translation public domain. No separate translation copyright applies.

<https://www.thestromata.com/texts/the-confessions-book-viii>