PAIDEIA CENTER
FOR THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLESHIP

DISCUSSION LEADER GUIDE

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *CONFESSIONS*

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Confessions

INTRODUCTION

"Since his death in AD 430 writers of every generation have exhausted all the superlatives in paying tribute to the genius of Saint Augustine" (Thomas A. Hand OSA, *Augustine on Prayer*, 11). If the history of western philosophy is nothing but footnotes to Plato, the same could be said of western theology's relationship to Augustine. To be sure, he is a towering figure of influence whose prodigious intellect produced splendidly lucid volumes on theology. For all their brilliance, though, his works also exhibit a capacious heart with an infectious love for God. This is especially true of the *Confessions*—Augustine's most popular and influential book.

Scholars have struggled to categorize the *Confessions*. What kind of book is this? Is it an autobiography? The problem with this classification is if we were to collect all the details Augustine communicates about his life in this work, it would be one book instead of thirteen. With the *Confessions* Augustine essentially invents a genre, because he not only narrates the externals of his life, but also his state of mind and heart. He provides a history of his own personal consciousness. Yet this isn't simply to "tell all" like many contemporary "confessions" you can pick up on Amazon or at Barnes & Noble. He has particular aims that can be discerned both in the way he tells his story and the position he held while telling it.

The *Confessions* is a theological autobiography creatively synthesizing two elements: an anthropology centered on internal dynamics of what it means to be human, and an external story cast in a biblical frame. Augustine's anthropology in the *Confessions* possesses an unmistakable tension between a desire and longing for union with God and an intractable sin nature. This tension is worked out in the external details of Augustine's life which, in many ways, cast him as the biblical prodigal who returns to God only through the centrality of the Incarnation. While the details of this synthesis are wonderfully personal as told through Augustine's unique life, there is a universality in their particularity. That is, by design the personal is an exemplar for the universal.

This appears to be by design given when Augustine wrote the *Confessions*. He was consecrated bishop of Hippo between 395 and 397. The *Confessions* was written between 397 and 401. As a new pastor, he is exploring what it means to be a Christian both for himself and for his flock. At the dawn of the fifth century, in the fraying Roman Empire, Augustine is constructing a Christian identity. He is helping his people understand what it means to pursue God in a chaotic time when what it meant to be Christian was not certain. This will entail, as the title suggests, "confessions."

Augustine uses “confessions” in a double sense. From the beginning of the book, it is doxology. Its first line is “You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised (Ps. 47:2).” Its last word is “Amen” (This appears in some versions, though the Latin manuscript support for this is not unanimous.). From beginning to end, it is a prayer of praise to God. But “confessions” also carries the sense of repentance. Augustine shows you cannot know God without knowing yourself, and so he goes all the way back to his birth in order to parse out and confess his sinfulness. Thus, he seeks to raise up the soul toward God, to glorify the ways of God to man, in a double sense of confessing God’s glory through repentance *and* praise.

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1ST MONTH

Books I - IV

Books I – IV contain meditations on sin, from infancy to Augustine's adolescence and the famous pear tree incident, to the lust and pride of his college years. Book IV shows how sin brings the stench of death in everything, which is poignantly described in the loss of his friend. Augustine uses sin and death, though, to highlight what God does in the Incarnation—how Christ descends into death that we might ascend to God in him. The way up is the way down.

Book I

We quickly learn that this is not an autobiography in the contemporary sense. Rather, it is a reflection upon life in the midst of prayer. Augustine's interest in talking about the details of his life extends only to the point that it illustrates theological and spiritual realities.

- With praise of God as the most fundamental impulse of human being, Augustine turns to meditate on the human condition as one that is riddled and distorted by sin. He starts with babies in order to make his point. Augustine communicates what we have been created for; but in order to get there, we must understand where we are.
    - Many look to infancy and expect to find innocence. Augustine finds quite the opposite. Human concupiscence, which is an inordinate grasp for the sake of self and fierce self-regard, is already present at the moment of birth. Thus, according to Augustine, the will is already developed at the beginning of human life.
    - An example of the pervasiveness of concupiscence is a baby getting jealous of another other baby nursing—even if he has just had his share! (pp. 9-10)
    - Augustine addresses not only babies but also social sin. Adults beat children for leisurely games even as they have their own. Augustine seems to be getting at the reality that *humanity is lost on its own*.

- What this leads to is a great emphasis of this whole work. That is, the Christian life starts with humility, which is the opposite of concupiscence. It is the opposite of filling for the sake of self; *it is the emptying of self* in imitation of Christ's incarnation.
    - Throughout *Confessions*, humility is a significant theme. But this is not just the putting down of pride.
    - *Confessions* also presents a picture of properly ordered desire: "Bring to me a sweetness surpassing all the seductive delights which I pursued. Enable me to love you with my strength that I may clasp your hand with all my heart" (pp. 17-18).
    - There is a picture of the revitalized self that is energized and increasingly equipped for the holy life. It is not just a bare humility we are called to, according to Augustine, but we are to gain skill in following Christ.
    - What this looks like in one sense is communicated through Book I's bookends. You have in the first paragraph perhaps the work's most famous line: "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (p. 3). And in the last paragraph Augustine communicates

that while fragmentation and restlessness come from himself and his nature, unity and rest are found in God (pp. 22-23). Augustine moves toward God as he praises him and learns to give thanks to God for all his gifts and talents, starting with his very life.

- Book I begins and ends in praise. Many scholars have noted here a certain epistemology, that is, in order to *know* God we must praise him.
  - In the words of Jason Byassee, "For Augustine, our desire to praise is key to our knowledge about anything" (*Reading Augustine*, 10). The key is that in praising the true God we are *not* praising ourselves (or some idol). There is a humility. But we are also gesturing toward that to which we must be conformed.
  - And when we are properly situated in the posture and exercise of praise, God reveals himself: *He resists the proud, but gives grace – that is, a knowledge of himself – to the humble.*

Book II

In Book II Augustine expands his meditations on sin, venturing into adolescence. The mood of this book is *restlessness* in the face of too much time – idleness – and bad influences. He's in the grip of *curiositas*—a distracting interest in created things without reference to their Creator. In that he discovers something about the nature and deceit of sin.

- At the center of this book is the episode of the pear tree (pp. 28-30), which is befuddling to some. Many commentators have asked why does Augustine use this story to illustrate sin? In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't seem like that big of a deal!
  - It certainly conjures up the Garden and Adam and Eve's Fall. Is this Augustine's "fall"?
  - The point of his dwelling on this stealing of the pear tree seems to be his desire to elaborate a theological anthropology, part of which is to meditate on the mystery of human evil and sinfulness.

- Why do we do what is harmful to ourselves (as sin invariably is)? Why, when we were made to praise God, do we destroy it all? Why do we spend time and expend energy on evil?
  - The pear tree is an occasion for reflecting on what *sin is about* and the *motivations of sin*. Seeing as our deepest motivation is to praise God, why do we go away from God and become estranged?
  - Augustine offers various approaches to this question, yet in the end none of them fully capture what is going on.
  - The key for Augustine is that in the end none of this explains sin and evil. In the end sin and evil are inexplicable; they do not make sense.
  - In its most radical form, sin and evil have no sense, no reason, no explanation (1 John 3:4: sin is *lawlessness*). Sin is sin because it is senseless and is unintelligible.
  - On p. 34 Augustine asks, "Who can untie this extremely twisted and tangled knot?"

Book III

Book III carries its readers forward into Augustine's "college years" where temptation and lust dominated. You will notice the details are light in order not to draw his readers into temptation.

- Augustine is dealing with something we know all too well, which is, this love or desire for desire for its own sake—a desire not related to anything higher than self-satisfaction.

- He also speaks in this book of two conversions. Often, we think of the *Confessions* as a work of

conversion, when in reality it is a book of various conversions.

- First is a conversion to philosophy, or, more literally, wisdom. This happens through the reading of a now lost book of Cicero. Augustine says the "book changed my feelings" (p. 39).
  - Perhaps it could be said the book helped move his thoughts and feelings to at least a different plane than pure physical and emotional self-satisfaction.
  - Augustine's education up until this point had been completely utilitarian and full of worldly ambition. It had been focused on how to speak well to gather crowds and make an income. In other words, there was no pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful.
  - What we find here in Book III is not a Christian conversion, but it is a step in the right direction. Augustine's loves are being positively reordered.

- Augustine also fell in with the Manicheans, which is another conversion. This "conversion" is tied up with two things: his desire for erudition and to probe the problem of evil.
  - Augustine's desire for erudition is wrapped up with his view of Scripture at the time. It should be noted he was dealing with a pretty crude Latin translation. But as will become evident later, part of the issue for Augustine is not just the translation but what kind of literature Scripture is.
  - More than that here, though, is how is Augustine approaching Scripture? He readily admits the meaning and beauty of Scripture discloses itself to "little ones", that is, the humble and not those who approach with swollen pride. As he finishes the section of ruminating on Manichean questions, he finishes with these words: "My inflated conceit shunned the Bible's restraint, and my gaze never penetrated to its inwardness. Yet the Bible was composed in such a way that as beginners mature, its meaning grows with them. I disdained to be a little beginner. Puffed up with pride, I considered myself a mature adult" (p. 40).

- At the end of this book his mother, Monica, who will be a mainstay, is introduced for the powerful spiritual figure she is. And her power is mainly seen in two ways: her simple, solid faith and her prayerful life.
  - Indeed, a pastor tells her, and these are some of the last words of the book, "it cannot be that the son of these tears should perish" (p. 51).

- Like the previous books, Book III is developing a theology of humility: "Return to you is along the path of devout humility. You purify us of evil habit, and are merciful to the sins we confess. You hear the groans of prisoners (Ps. 101:21) and release us from the chains we have made for ourselves, on condition that we do not erect against you the horns (Ps. 74:5f.) of a false liberty by avaricious desire to possess more and, at risk of losing everything, through loving our private interest more than you, the good of all that is" (pp. 47-48).

Book IV

What is striking about Book IV are the beautiful passages about friendship and death and Augustine's wrestling with his Manichean materialism.

- In Books I-III Augustine has been meditating on sin. Now he shifts to the *wages of sin, which is death.*
  - He uses his depression at the death of a friend to paint a picture in which everything is death: "'Grief darkened my heart' (Lam. 5:17). Everything on which I set my gaze was death" (p. 57).
  - Augustine wants his readers to contemplate death ruling over humanity – that "everything on which he set his gaze was death" – and so he takes the reader into a vision of all pervasiveness of death.

- A poignant picture of depression results (pp. 57-58). Theologically, he has led us from sin to the tyrannical oppression of death, suffocating the human spirit.

- P. 64 contains a pivotal meditation on the Incarnation. In the middle of this heartache and realization of the transience of created things, seemingly out of nowhere he puts forward a pious meditation on Christ—the descending Christ, as Life, slaying Death.
  - This is a pivotal passage in many respects. It may seem merely inserted, but it is crucial for the structure and meaning of the work.
  - Christ's story intervenes in the middle of Augustine's story. It comes out of nowhere and is then left behind. In this key place where we see Augustine's story and Christ's story intertwined, we see a key to the whole project of the *Confessions*.
  - At the center of Christ's story, of course, is the cry of return from death to God. As a result of the Incarnation, this has been placed in the human condition. Henceforth, Augustine's ascent from death is going to be aligned with the cry of return that is placed in our being through Christ's resurrection. That is to say, the story of Augustine's conversion and sanctification, as a story of return from death, is intertwined with the story of Christ's resurrection.

- Note: Augustine takes the life of ascent, which was central to Neo-Platonism, and does what would be completely problematic to them—he mixes ascent with descent. We ascend because the Life descends. We ascend because Life/The Highest Good descended into the region of Death. We plug into this ascent by ourselves descending in humility and repentance. In other words, the Christian life is a series of deaths and resurrections, dying to sin so that we might receive the fresh Life of Christ as we progress toward him. This repeated trope in the *Confessions* complicates the charge that what Augustine offers is simply baptized Platonism.

Discussion Prompts

- Does following Augustine "down memory lane" help you reframe your own memory of past behavior and put it in a different light? How does meditating on our sinful past *before the eyes of God* bring light? To put it differently, what is the role of memory in our sanctified walk?

- Do perhaps some of our "minor" offenses illustrate more powerfully the wickedness of sin? How or how not?

- Do you find any of the details in Book III regarding the North African Church, Monica, and the allure of the Manicheans important for what has been called "the educated ministry"? How important is it for Christian leaders, pastors, and teachers to be "educated"?

- Other than the Bible, have you had a book profoundly shape you in the way Cicero's *Hortensius* shaped Augustine? What was the book and what effect did it have on you?

- Augustine obviously loved his friend and his concubine very much, yet he never names them. Why do you think that is?

2ND MONTH

Books V - IX

Books V – IX take the reader through a series of Augustine's conversions. They begin with his disillusionment with Manicheanism. He briefly spends time as a skeptic before finding more satisfying answers among the books of the Platonists. But these are all temporary stopping points until he finally becomes a convinced Christian.

Book V

We have all likely had the experience of disappointment when a person of reputation was not all that he or she was cracked up to be. This chapter begins Augustine's disillusionment with Manichaeism because its most famous bishop and articulator at the time, Faustus, didn't deliver the goods. On one level, this chapter is the story of two leaders and teachers: Faustus and Ambrose.

- In Book V Augustine is on the move, both geographically and spiritually. While Augustine is migrating from Carthage to Rome to Milan, God is orchestrating these moves in his providence in order to bring Augustine to himself: "I was led to [Ambrose] by you, unaware that through him, in full awareness, I might be led to you" (pp. 87-88).
    - Interestingly, these moves involve Augustine's own sin, specifically his deception of his Mom and his worldly ambition. Yet, Augustine's robust sense of providence allows for many layers to be used by God in order to bring his elect to himself.
    - It is worth noting what was alluring about Ambrose at this point. While it will eventually be his skill in expounding the Scripture, initially, to this hardened skeptic, it was the bishop's warmth and kindness.

- As Augustine moves from North Africa to the intellectual havens of the Empire, he's ashamed at the faith of his upbringing and understands it did not adequately nourish his mind. But he too easily buys what the confident intellectuals are selling.
    - Augustine was attracted to the Manicheans because of their confidence and, he thought, robust learning. They had it all figured out. But there was a problem: their cosmic claims didn't match up with straightforward scientific observation of the world. And their best living teacher, Faustus, couldn't help untangle these knots. Augustine had initial blind adherence. Once he moved to apply his reasoning, however, Manichaeism showed itself to be a house of cards.
    - We see Augustine wrestling in this book with the dynamics of faith and reason. Perhaps it could be said that reason was sufficient for Augustine to doubt the truthfulness of such sects as the Manicheans and lead to a deep skepticism, but it took faith for him to make any progress with Christianity. Faith and understanding occupy overlapping territory, working together. But faith must lead in the matter of God. The posture of faith must be in place if one is going to learn anything about God, if one is going to make any progress. So, though associated with Anselm, Augustine promoted "faith seeking understanding."

    - The function of reason is interesting at this stage. He needed to lose the grip of Manichaeism, and

reason plays an important role in his liberation from empty philosophy. Thus, Augustine will never completely discount reason, even though it must be considered rightly vis-à-vis faith.

- In this book Augustine moves from Manichaeism to a skepticism that doubted everything to being a catechumen. The latter is not full entry into the church but a stage of receiving instruction.
  - He's learning that eloquence can be empty and foolish and wisdom can be served up simply: "Already I had learnt from you that nothing is true merely because it is eloquently said, nor false because the signs coming from the lips make sounds deficient in a sense of style. Again, a statement is not true because it is enunciated in an unpolished idiom, nor false because the words are splendid. Wisdom and foolishness are like food that is nourishing or useless. Whether the words are ornate or not does not decide the issue. Food of either kind can be served in either town or country ware" (p. 78).
  - Augustine realizes he needs to not be so attracted to something simply by the way it is served up.

Book VI

The theme of faith and reason is carried forward into Book VI. Augustine is moving away from blind certainty into a place of uncertainty. He recognizes he was wrong in his adherence to Manicheanism, yet he was also wrong in his accusations against Christianity.

- In Augustine's suspense of commitment, he cannot go any further. The best reason can do at this point is allow him to reject falsehood. It has a negative function. It does not take him into an apprehension of the truth.
  - What's intriguing and illuminating in what is unfolding in this book is a certain kind of dramatic irony in how Augustine seeks certainty and how he finds it. He seeks a certain kind of certainty but finally gets a different kind.
  - The kind of knowing he is after at this point is mathematical certainty, but he does not, in fact, encounter this kind of certainty.
  - There are elements of rational work as Augustine is making his way toward God. For example, he is learning from Ambrose about the interpretation of Scripture in an intelligible way. What is more, he makes apologetic arguments about the plausibility of universal revelation given God's providential care of all humanity. These are not the "breakthrough," however.
  - Certainty happens somewhat subtly through different means; indeed, it is depicted through imagery. It is medicinal, maternal, and affective (pp. 97-98). The transformation of reason happens through the reasons of the heart. It is not argument per se but healing and touch that move Augustine's journey at this point: "little by little, Lord, with a most gentle and merciful hand you touched and calmed my heart" (p. 95).

- Augustine's healing seems to be taking place through three things in this book: two positive and one negative.
  - On the positive side, it is evident he has a growing respect for the Christian leader, Ambrose. He's a man who feeds on God's Word and is making that Word (especially the Old Testament) intelligible to Augustine. It is evident how central the transformative power of God's Word is going to be in Augustine. Even now, his heart is turning in its posture toward Scripture and the Church's leaders.
  - Another positive is the importance of friends in Augustine's life. There's Alypius, who is very instrumental in his life, as well as others. Friends are a double-edged sword, though. They can draw one into grave foolishness, like Augustine with the Pear Tree incident and Alypius with the violence of the arena. But they can also be those who show what love is and help us love God.

Peter Brown said, "Augustine needed the constant response and reassurance of a circle of friends: both to know that he was loved, and to know that there was someone worth loving, encouraged him greatly to love in return. 'I must confess that I throw myself headlong upon their charity, especially when I am depressed by the tensions of the world'" (*Augustine of Hippo*, 195).
    - The negative element that is ingredient in Augustine's healing is his coming to grips with his lack of restraint—this is actually an indication that God is drawing near. We must be miserable before we can be happy. His inability is being revealed to him so that he is entirely "shut up to God": "What tortuous paths! How fearful a fate for 'the rash soul' (Isa. 3:9) which nursed the hope that after it had departed from you, it would find something better! Turned this way and that, on its back, on its side, on its stomach, all positions are uncomfortable. You alone are repose" (p. 110).

Book VII

In this book we sense Augustine on the precipice of his ultimate conversion as Platonism is held up to Christianity.

- Platonism provides what might called a good and basic natural theology. It has an understanding of the transcendence of God, which is tied to its understanding of spiritual ascent. But what of the Incarnation? Augustine makes clear: this is the Christian way.
    - Platonists can get one to aspire to a transcendent God, *but only Christianity can get one to God*. And the way you get there is by understanding "up and down." The latter comes before the former, because, as Christ showed the world, humiliation comes before exaltation.
    - In grappling with Platonism, Augustine is coming to grips with the main competitor to Christianity in his day. His critical interaction is instructive because he recognizes Platonism is not without its virtues.
    - One of the ways he deals with the competition is to have recurrent Platonic ascents, which are attempts to move toward perfect being, to perfect divinity. These are a spiritual ascent and vision which move from the many to the one, from fragments to unity, from low to high.
    - In these ascents it is tempting to deduce that Augustine is a Platonist. But in every one there is a twist wherein he inverts something.
    - In Augustine's grappling with Platonism, his take is that it has correct conceptions of the transcendence of God, a divine mediating principle, and creation's participating in being. They get good grades for basic natural theology on ontology and elements of anthropology. While he is happy to concede that, Augustine keeps coming back to their cluelessness on the Incarnation. They only possess a partial truth—a theology of glory that bypasses the cross.

- On pp. 121-123, Augustine makes condensed use of the Scriptures which were places of conflict in the trinitarian debates of the 4th century. He uses Scriptures displaying a twofold account of God and Christ.
    - On the one hand, Christ is in the form of God, while, on the other hand, our Lord took on the form of a servant. Augustine says that the Platonists have the first part right. However, they do not know of the drama of God coming to take on human flesh.
    - Augustine goes through the unrecognized humility of God the Son in order to show how his heart was healed: "You have mercy on dust and ashes, and it has pleased you to restore my deformities in your sight (Ps. 18:15). By inward goads you stirred me to make me find it unendurable until, through my inward perception, you were a certainty to me. My swelling was reduced by your hidden healing hand, and my mind's troubled and darkened eye, under the hot dressing of salutary sorrows, was from 'day to day' (Ps. 60:9) brought back to health" (pp. 120-121).

- A good example of what Augustine does with Platonic ascents is found on pp. 123-129.
  - In the Platonic books he was admonished to return to himself. He does that and affirms it, but it is with Christ as his enabler and helper: "I sought a way to obtain strength enough to enjoy you; but I did not find it until I embraced 'the mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim. 2:5)" (p. 128).
  - For Augustine, this is a difference between Platonism and Christianity. It is the difference between aspiration and achievement. The Platonists can get you to aspire to God, but they cannot get you "there." Aspiring to godliness and becoming godly are two different things.
  - What is missing with the Platonists is actually inhabiting the Light. They have fleeting glimpses whereas Christians are united to the Light through the gracious pathway of humility: "In their weariness they fall prostrate before this divine weakness which rises and lifts them up" (p. 128).
  - The Incarnation teaches the salutary humility which allows us to become citizens of the realm of Light.

- While some sections of this book are highly philosophical in tone, Augustine keeps coming back to the centrality of a loving relationship with God in Christ. There is a clear and compelling "affective personalism" at the center of his thought. That is, dwelling with and relating to the Divine involves all the affections.

Books VIII - IX

Book VIII is the book of Augustine's final conversion, and on its heels Book IX presents a picture of the victory of humility. From heroes to friends to his mother, Augustine has a role for exemplars in the faith who can spur one on to godliness. These books also present a highly developed picture of experiential grace. God must enter into the divided and broken will and heal it by grace before it can move to God. Finally, in another victory of humility, the very biblical text that he used to treat with such derision, as beneath the grandeur of a Cicero, becomes his spiritual food.

- In Books VIII – IX Augustine provides two stories that dramatize Christian humility over Platonic thought: The conversion of Victorinus symbolizes the descent from the pride of the Platonists. And with Monica we have the ascent of the simple, humble believer. Both are made possible because of grace.
  - Augustine provides an apologia for Victorinus's conversion on pp. 134-141. Victorinus is an exemplar of descent: "he was not ashamed to become the servant of your Christ, and an infant born at your font, to bow his head to the yoke of humility and to submit his forehead to the reproach of the cross" (p. 135). Victorinus made plausible for Augustine the conversion of someone of his ambition and education and rank.
  - The other story is the vision with Monica at Ostia. In Monica, we have a simple believer who can go through a spiritual ascent but does not need great training in Platonic philosophy in order to do so. Actually, the vision is Monica and Augustine *together*, one greatly educated and the other not, but both able to increase in a vision of God because of divine grace.
  - There is the descent of the great Victorinus and the ascent of humble Monica.
  - These two stories form an apologetic for Christianity against Neo-Platonism. There also might be a subtle apologetic apparent in the location of Augustine's conversion, which takes place in a beautiful, physical garden. This communicates that moving toward God does not include a flight from the body.
  - Further exemplars in these books are St. Antony and imperial officials who give up lust to follow Christ. All are monuments to grace.

- A theme of the *Confessions* that comes to a head in these books is the struggle of the will. Many scholars consider this the best introduction to the Pelagian controversy.
    - Augustine is spiritually "stuck" because knowledge is not enough. To know the truth does not get you to God: "But my soul hung back. It refused, and had no excuse to offer. The arguments were exhausted, and all had been refuted. The only thing left to it was a mute trembling, and as if it were facing death it was terrified of being restrained from the treadmill of habit by which it suffered 'sickness unto death' (John 11:4)" (p. 146).
    - The drama and bondage and division of the will are present here in the existential setting. How is it, Augustine asks, that the will is powerful enough to move the body, but not enough to move itself?
    - Instrumental in the healing of his will is a conversation with a friend about St. Antony. Augustine reacts strongly: "What is wrong with us? What is this you have heard? Uneducated people are rising up and capturing heaven (Matt. 11:12), and we with our high culture without any heart—see where we roll in the mud of flesh and blood. Is it because they are ahead of us that we are ashamed to follow? Do we feel no shame at making not even an attempt to follow?" (p. 146).
    - All this culminates in the famous scene at a garden in Milan, which might be intentionally mirroring Gethsemane. Perhaps Augustine is articulating this struggle of will in an attempt to make connections with Jesus in Gethsemane.
    - The moment of grace comes through the cry of *Tolle Lege*: "Pick up and read" (pp. 152). It is through the cry of a children's game that Augustine is prompted to turn to the Scriptures. The freedom of the will here is itself a grace, and it is not insignificant that it comes from an external source.

- A significant aspect of Augustine's spirituality that we find in both of these books is that his most significant spiritual moments are not alone. His spiritual journey is not from "alone to alone." For converting Augustine, the value of friendship is modulated into the indispensability of the communion of saints in the Church.

- One of the things that Book IX makes clear is that Augustine's conversion was followed by an immersion into Scripture. This is significant because one of his greatest pre-conversion battles was over Scripture and how it lacked the elegance of Cicero. How could it be God's Word if it contained such lowliness?
    - What Augustine comes to see is how Scripture gives voice to his soul. It is drawing him to God as its words are internalized: "I cried out loud when I acknowledged inwardly what I read in external words.... As I read, I was set on fire" (p. 162). Scripture became "living and active" for him, dividing his old self from him and calling his new self to God.

Discussion Prompts

- What do you think of Augustine's intellectual struggles? Do you find here anything helpful in thinking through how we conceive the role of faith and reason in the Christian life today? Can reason lead to faith while not giving one faith? Can reason strengthen faith once one has it?

- Does Augustine provide resources for speaking of truth that originates from sources other than Christianity?

- According to Augustine, would you say introspection is helpful or unhelpful? How and why?

- What do you think of Augustine's depiction of sex, marriage, and asceticism? Does Augustine's

thought on these matters have something positive to contribute to the Church today? How might it challenge us, married and unmarried alike?

- What elements in these books do you think Augustine intends for his readers to imitate?

3RD MONTH

Books X - XIII

Book X marks a shift in tense in the *Confessions*: "I confess to you who I am *now*" (p. 180); "I will reveal not who I *was*, but what I have *now* come to be and what I *continue* to be" (p. 182). Augustine wants to know who he is *now* before God. If the transition from Books I – IX to X mark a shift from the past to the present, the shift from Book X to Books XI – XIII marks a turn from the individual to the universal as Augustine attends to Scripture. These books together serve as a pivot in the *Confessions*.

Book X

- In the Introduction to this guide it was considered from what standpoint Augustine wrote the *Confessions*. Perhaps as in no other book, in Book X Augustine is very conscious of his being a pastor.
  - He asks near the beginning, "Why then should I be concerned for human readers to hear my confessions?" (p. 180). There is the temptation of wanting confession as a form of gossip rather than as fuel for edification. He then goes on in pp. 180-181 to show how others can be encouraged by the testimony of grace in another.
  - But this realization that others are hearing his confession wakes Augustine up to his present and future interaction with those he can serve by bringing them closer to God. He desires for it to be brotherly, where there is rejoicing approval and disapproval in the bonds of love: "When I am confessing not what I was but what I am now, the benefit lies in this: I am making this confession not only before you with a secret exaltation and fear and with a secret grief touched by hope, but also in the ears of believing sons of men, sharers in my joy, conjoined with me in mortality, my fellow citizens and pilgrims, some who have gone before, some who follow after, and some who are my companions in this life. They are your servants, my brothers, who by your will are your sons and my masters" (pp. 181-182).

- Grace continues to be a significant theme in Book X. It is grace which heals the mind and will, and it is grace that brings about the twofold nature of confession.
  - When sin is involved, grace brings confession in genuine repentance: "Stir up the heart when people read and hear the confessions of my past wickedness, which you have forgiven and covered up to grant me happiness in yourself, transforming my soul by faith and your sacrament. Prevent their heart from sinking into the sleep of despair and saying 'It is beyond my power'. On the contrary, the heart is aroused in the love of your mercy and the sweetness of your grace, by which every weak person is giving power, while dependence on grace produces awareness of one's own weakness. Good people are delighted to hear about the past sins of those who have now shed them. The pleasure is not in the evils as such, but that though they were so once, they are not like that now" (p. 180).
  - When obedience is involved, grace brings an acknowledgement that it is God alone working it: "My entire hope is exclusively in your very great mercy. Grant what you command, and command what you will" (p. 202).
  - At the heart of Augustine's ongoing prayer for grace is that God would bring to completion the

work which he began in uniting his loves: "He loves you less who together with you loves something which he does not love for your sake. O love, you ever burn and are never extinguished. O charity, my God, set me on fire. You command continence; grant what you command, and command what you will" (p. 202). This last line will be what draws the ire of a British monk named Pelagius.

- The *Confessions* is a work filled with questions, and questions especially frame the mood of Book X. Recall, part of Augustine's anthropology is human beings are on a search. Augustine scours memory, intellect, and will in order to find God. Yet, human beings aren't merely a desiring people. Another key aspect of Augustine's anthropology is these faculties are stained by sin and can be twisted into service of self and so draw one away from God. They can be used for prideful spiritual heroics that put distance between ourselves and God.
    - Where does Augustine leave us as he ends the narrative of his life in the *Confessions*? While sin lurks around every corner and seeks to deceive us, even when we are walking with God, Augustine leaves us by turning to Jesus.
    - This is the continual genius of this great work: "A Christian spiritual life is not finally a heroic ascent, fighting off opponents, climbing to a God who's then glad you finally made it. Our way to God is not, despite the impression left by this difficult [Book X], a remarkable intellectual feat of climbing from one higher conception of God to another. Rather, in this divine/human encounter, all the 'work' is being done from the divine end" (Byassee, *Reading Augustine*, 63).
    - In Christianity you do not have heroic ascent. At its heart is divine descent born of God's love: "How you have loved us, good Father: you did not 'spare your only Son but delivered him up for us sinners' (Rom. 8:32). How you have loved us, for whose sake 'he did not think it a usurpation to be equal to you and was made subject to the death of the cross' (Phil. 2:6, 8)…. Terrified by my sins and the pile of my misery, I had racked my heart and had meditated taking flight to live in solitude. But you forbade me and comforted me saying: 'That is why Christ died for all, so that those who live should not live for themselves, but for him who died for them' (2 Cor. 5:15)" (pp. 219-220). God heals our sin and pride and brings us to him through a mediator. We seek to be present to God, when we should meditate on how God is present to us already in his mercy.

Book XI

- In Book XI Augustine presents the frustration of time and the rest of eternity. This dialectic of time and eternity is important in the *Confessions*.
    - What is time in Book XI? Time having meaning is elusive. The past no longer exists, the future does not yet exist, and the present is gone before we know it.
    - Within this vertigo of the elusiveness of our hold on our being, identity is constructed. This aspiration is a desire for eternity, where we will be gathered up in the simultaneity of God's eternity.
    - Is there something really to look forward to, that is *really* there to look forward to, something that can be savored and not merely pass like the current present?
    - Identity is bringing the past to the present with the expectation of the future: a real future of God's eternity. The future of God's eternity is the future which does not pass—eternal sabbath.
    - If we look forward to something in this world we know it will be just like everything that is not present; it will pass. The sabbath of God's eternity is what is the *real* future for the faithful.

- Without these final books of the *Confessions* we have just another inspiring life on the stage of the world that flickers off. There is no epilogue of hagiography that will follow his confessions. Rather, Augustine points us to eternity.

- Time illustrates our fragmentation, how nothing is held together—even the highest moments pass; even the pleasures are fleeting. You cannot rest and you cannot rest in anything.
- The hope of the Christian is we will be gathered to God and in him and in eternity find our joyful rest.
- How do we then sanctify time? By remembering God's goodness in the past and hoping in our future inheritance. Thus, we are able to live in faith, trusting God is for us in our circumstances even as we seek to bend those circumstances to God.

Book XII - XIII

- As a general point, in the patristic era theological anthropology comes through exegesis of Genesis. The fact that Augustine goes there is an indication of his project, and a shift from the individual to the universal. (He will return repeatedly to these chapters in his other writings: offering a lengthy exposition in *City of God* and penning three commentaries too.)

- In Book XII Augustine presents living in God's world in the Scriptures. Why does he go to Genesis? If the eschatology of Book XI is to find repose in the light that will not pass away, Books XII – XIII reveal this as realized in scriptural exegesis.
  - You do not have to wait until you die. We have the Scriptures. You can begin contemplating God right now in his Word. Augustine is saying the Christian begins to live now by scriptural exegesis.
  - The Bible is the new world of Augustine, his new country.
  - Rather than a place to go in and get out after we get what we want, the Scriptures, according to Augustine, are the place to dwell.
  - These books mark a clear shift in the course of the *Confessions* from Augustine's own search through his history to entering the "history" of God in his Word. Life, for Augustine, is now found in God's books.

- Book XIII brings to a point a very important theme of the *Confessions* already mentioned: the Christian life is not lived alone. There is communion with the saints and with the triune God. Augustine finally only "finds himself" in this communion.
  - Augustine ends his great work with a meditation on the Church. Perhaps he is suggesting that the "way to 'ascend' to this God is to 'descend,' to the humble realities of church life, boring committee meetings, ornery fellow human beings, with weak commitments and half-baked intentions, the very grime and glory of life. *That* people is our means to growth into *this* God. Not a solo intellectual flight, but a descent to the crucified God at our feet, and the humble, stubborn, intractable people at the church you grew up in" (Byassee, *Reading Augustine*, 79).

Discussion Prompts

- Why is memory ultimately not something that can ever fully be explained, according to Augustine? What makes memory such a fascinating subject, and what are some of its major paradoxes according to Augustine?

- What makes for genuine human happiness for Augustine? How does that compare/contrast with how many Christians today understand it?

- How does Book XI inform a view of God's transcendence? Does it mean more than God's grandeur beyond us?

- Augustine describes salvation in many ways throughout the *Confessions*. One of his favorite metaphors is that of the scattered self being gathered back together by God. Is this a particularly helpful metaphor in describing salvation today?

- Augustine engages in a lot of allegory in Books XII – XIII. Is this an acceptable mode of biblical exegesis in your understanding? Is his practice here useful? Why or why not?

- Through these last few books, does Augustine draw out something in his theology of creation that you had never seen before?

- What might it mean to enter into and dwell in Scriptures as the space where Christians live and enjoy God now?