

## Augustine of Hippo (AD354-430)

the boy from North Africa  
the great teacher  
the Christian

### 1

#### The pressures of family

When we were at the baths my father saw that I was becoming a man; he was delighted by this, at the prospect of grandchildren.

My mother was afraid shackling me to a wife would damage my hope of an academic career, which (as I knew) both my parents were all too eager for. My father thought of my gaining such hollow achievements.

My mother followed me all the way to the sea. She clung desperately to me, trying either to make me come home or to set out with me, but I tricked her – I pretended – I lied to my mother: and so I made my escape.

#### Turbulent adolescence

Among friends of my own age I blushed over the slightest loss of prestige. I would hear them boasting of their own scandalous deeds. The more discreditable the deed, the more they bragged about it. So I began to take pleasure in such behaviour not just because of the lust of the deed itself, but also because of the kudos it won me. I faked depravity to avoid the disapproval of my peers. If no actual wrongdoing took place which I could boast of...I pretended to have done something wrong (though really I had not). I did not want my innocence to look like weakness, or to be scorned because of my sexual inexperience.

So much for the innocence of youth. There is no such thing, Lord, truly there is no such thing! Human failings are the same from the childhood time of slaves and teachers, trivia, ball games and birds as in the adult transition to magistrates and monarchs, gold and estates and property: they are exactly the same – and likewise more severe punishments take the place of the schoolmaster's cane.

I did not love you, and by separating from you I prostituted myself; and as I prostituted myself the cry resounded from every side: "Well done, well done!" For the love of this world is a physical infidelity to you.

#### Stealing Pears

Your law, God, surely punishes theft; and that law is written in human hearts. I wanted to commit theft, so I did. I did not steal because of any kind of need. For I stole what I had already in plenty, and of far better quality. I had no desire to enjoy what I stole; what I enjoyed was the theft and sin themselves.

There was a pear tree near to our vineyard, laden with fruit which was not particularly attractive or tasty. We set out in the dead of night – a gang of good-for-nothing youths – to shake it down and carry off its fruit. Up till then we had enjoyed ourselves causing trouble in the town's streets.

We carried off great loads of fruit, not for ourselves to eat but for throwing to pigs – though we did eat some of them, to emphasise that what we were doing was something we enjoyed because it was forbidden.

Look, and see my heart, see my heart! How was it that I became a wrongdoer for nothing, and the cause of my wrongdoing was none other than wrongdoing itself? It was loathsome and I loved it. I was in love with death, I was in love with my own faults. My soul was disintegrating into oblivion. It did not use disgraceful means to achieve what it wanted; what it wanted was the disgrace itself.

I was pathetic! What was it that I loved about you, my theft, my deed of darkness done in the sixteenth year of my age? You were not beautiful, because you were an act of theft. Then again, should I be addressing you as if you were an actual thing? The fruit we stole was beautiful because it was your creation, O most Beautiful of all, Creator of all, my God. Yes, the fruit was beautiful, but my pitiable soul did not desire the actual fruit. I had plenty of better fruit – I plucked these only for the sake of thieving. For I threw away what I had stolen. All that I feasted on from my theft was my own wickedness, and I was delighted to enjoy it. Even if one morsel of fruit passed my lips, it was sin that sweetened it.

Now, O Lord my God, I want to work out what it was about the theft that gave me pleasure. Was it possible to take pleasure in something just because it was forbidden, and for no other reason than that it was forbidden? In that theft, in which I enjoyed nothing else but the actual thieving, had I been alone I would not have done it (I remember thinking so at the time). Yes, I would definitely not have done it alone. So what I loved about it was participating with others in doing what I did. Because my pleasure was not in the pears, it was in the actual crime that a fellowship of sinners committed together.

What were my thoughts and feelings? It was for a laugh, to give us a bit of a thrill, at the thought of cheating people who had no idea we were capable of such behaviour and who would strongly disapprove. So why did I get pleasure from something that I would not have done at all if left to myself? Yes, on my own I would never have done it, no, I definitely would not have done it on my own. Out of a game and a lark came an eagerness to do harm, a taste for inflicting losses on others without myself gaining anything, or enjoying settling a score. Once someone says, "Come on, let's do it," it is shameful to be anything but shameless.

## 2

### Wanting to understand what we believe

If anyone thinks that they have understood the holy scriptures, or some part of them, but does so in a way which fails to build up that double love (of God and neighbour) then they have not yet understood it.

It is a wretched enslavement of the soul to take figurative sayings [in the Bible] as literal truths, and fail to lift the eyes of the mind above physical creation to drink in the eternal light.

### Christian learning

We take issue with Christians who pride themselves on knowing the sacred scriptures without human guidance. Each and every one of us, from childhood, learned our own language through listening; or by having someone teach us. Are we to advise Christians not to teach the faith to their children, because the apostles were once

filled with the Holy Spirit, and spoke in the languages of all the nations? Or should those who have not received such gifts consider themselves not to be Christian? or doubt whether they have received the Holy Spirit? Surely they should learn, without pride, whatever they can learn through human instruction.

God could have used angels to teach us, to be sure, but the human condition would be contemptible indeed if God were unwilling to impart his word to humanity by means of human beings.

Whoever boasts that they understand everything that is obscure in the Bible by divine gift, without any instruction, should admit that this is not some power of their own, but is bestowed by divine providence. But why do they then presume to interpret it for other people, instead of sending those people straight to God too?

I am giving people not only my interpretation, but also rules for them to follow when they attempt an interpretation of their own.

### Discovering God, discovering self

God is the doctor of my inner self.

You have struck my heart with your word,  
and I have fallen in love with you.

You, Lord, are a lover of souls.

You have made us for yourself,  
and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

God, grant me chastity and celibacy – but not just yet!

### Selfhood

So what am I, my God? What kind of nature am I?

A complex and manifold life and one that is utterly incalculable.

I am a creature who remembers, I am a mind.

I was left to be an unhappy place where I could neither endure remaining, nor withdrawing. For where could my heart flee, to escape from my heart? Where could I flee, to escape from myself?

### The power of wrongdoing

I myself was bound, not by someone else's iron chains but by my own iron will. My feelings of sexual desire were formed out of the perversion of my will. They grew into a habitual behaviour, something I could not live without. These quite small links joined themselves together into the bond I called my chain: it was a cruel slavery which had me in shackles.

### Faith

Sometimes my belief was relatively sturdy, sometimes rather flimsy, but I never stopped believing that you exist and that you have a care for us, even if I had no idea either what was the proper understanding of your substance or what path led to you, or led back to you.

### Being mocked for believing

Ignorant deceivers posed questions to me: where does evil come from? Is God bounded by a physical form? Does he have hair and nails? Can those men who had many wives, and who killed people and sacrificed animals, be called righteous?

### Freedom from desire for status and wealth

At last my mind was free from the gnawing anxieties of ambition and acquisition, of scratching the itch of physical desire and wallowing in it: and I started to pour out my thoughts to you, my illumination, my riches and my salvation, O Lord my God.

### Managing love and loss

My mother Monnica did not think of her corpse being elaborately laid out or embalmed; she did not crave a fine memorial, or burial in her native land.

Her only desire was to be remembered at your altar where she had been devoted to you, never missing a single day.

Inspire, O my Lord, my God, your servants my brothers, inspire them, whenever they read my *Confessions*, to remember at your altar your servant Monnica and her sometime husband Patricius.

Let her last request to me be fulfilled for her more abundantly through many people's prayers —

prompted by my *Confessions* — than by my prayers alone.

## 3

### Prayer

Sometimes you draw me deep within into an experience like no other, to an inexplicable pleasure. If that pleasure were perfected in me, I do not know what could possibly be lacking from such a life.

I entered deep within myself under your guidance, for you became my helper. I entered and saw, as it were with the eye of my soul: above that same eye of my soul, above my mind, the unchangeable light. It was not this ordinary light which all flesh can behold; nor was it a grander version, as it were, of the same kind.

That light was not above my mind in the way that oil floats above water, or sky above land; it was greater than that, because it made me, and I was lesser because I was its creation. One who knows the Truth knows this light; and one who knows it knows eternity too. Love knows it.

### Prayers

O eternal Truth, and true Love, and beloved Eternity,  
you are my God — day and night I sigh for you!  
Your beams of light reflected back the weakness of my sight,  
so brightly did they shine upon me,  
and I trembled with love and awe.  
You called from far off, "Truly I am who I am".  
And I heard you, as one hears in one's heart,  
and from that moment there was no room for doubt,  
and I would sooner doubt that I was alive  
than that truth was non-existent,  
for it is visible and understood  
through the things that have been made.

Late have I loved you,  
O Beauty so old and so new:

late have I loved you!  
And look! You were within me,  
and I was outside myself:  
and it was there that I searched for you.  
In my unloveliness I plunged  
into the lovely things which you created:  
you were with me, but I was not with you.  
Those created things kept me far away from you:  
yet if they had not been in you,  
they would have not been at all.  
You called and shouted: and broke through my  
deafness.  
You flamed and shone: and banished my  
blindness.  
You breathed your fragrance on me:  
and I drew in my breath and I pant for you.  
I have tasted you: and now I hunger and thirst for  
more.  
You have touched me: and I have burned for your  
peace.

O Truth, light of my heart:  
do not let my darkness speak to me!  
I have deviated towards earthly things, have  
fallen into shadow:  
but from here, even from here I have truly loved  
you.  
I wandered from the path: and then remembered  
you.  
I heard your voice behind me, calling me to come  
home:  
but I only just heard it over the outcry of the  
unquiet.  
And now, look! —I am returning now,  
hot and thirsty, to drink at your fountain,  
let no-one stand in my way: let me drink from it,  
and hereafter let me live.  
Let me not be my own life:  
from my own self I have lived badly.  
To myself I was death:  
but in you I come to life again.  
Converse with me, commune with me:  
I have believed in your holy books  
and their words are full of mystery.