



The Education of St. Augustine [Confessions 1]

St. Augustine

BOOK ONE

Infancy

7. “Hear me, O God! Woe to the sins of men!” When a man cries thus, you show him mercy, for you created the man but not the sin in him. Who brings to remembrance the sins of my infancy? For in your sight there is none free from sin, not even the infant who has lived but a day upon this earth. Who brings this to my remembrance? Does not each little one, in whom I now observe what I no longer remember of myself? In what ways, in that time, did I sin? Was it that I cried for the breast? If I should now so cry—not indeed for the breast, but for food suitable to my condition—I should be most justly laughed at and rebuked. What I did then deserved rebuke but, since I could not understand those who rebuked me, neither custom nor common sense permitted me to be rebuked. As we grow we root out and cast away from us such childish habits. Yet I have not seen anyone who is wise who cast away the good when trying to purge the bad. Nor was it good, even in that time, to strive to get by crying what, if it had been given me, would have been hurtful; or to be bitterly indignant at those who, because they were older—not slaves, either, but free—and wiser than I, would not indulge my capricious desires. Was it a good thing for me to try, by struggling as hard as I could, to harm them for not obeying me, even when it would have done me harm to have been obeyed? Thus, the infant’s innocence lies in the weakness of his body and not in the infant mind. I have myself observed a baby to be jealous, yough it could not speak; it was livid as it watched another infant at the breast.

Who is ignorant of this? Mothers and nurses tell us that they cure these things by I know not what remedies. But is this innocence, when the fountain of milk is flowing fresh and abundant, that another who needs it should not be allowed to share it, even yough he requires such nourishment to sustain his life? Yet we look leniently on such things, not because they are not faults, or even small faults, but because they will vanish as the years pass. For, alyough we allow for such things in an infant, the same things could not be tolerated patiently in an adult.

Therefore, O Lord my God, you who gave life to the infant, and a body which, as we see, you furnished with senses, shaped with limbs, beautified with form, and endowed with all vital energies for its well-being and health—you commanded me to praise you for these things, to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praise unto his name, O Most High. For you are God, omnipotent and good, even if you had done no more than these things, which no other but you can do—you alone who made all things fair and ordered everything according to your law.

I hesitate to dwell on this pare of my life of which, O Lord, I have no remembrance, about which I must trust the word of others and what I can surmise from observing other infants, even if such guesses are trustworyour. For it lies in the deep murk of my forgetfulness and thus is like the period which I passed in my mother’s womb. But if “I was conceived in iniquity, and in sin my mother nourished me in her womb,” where, I pray you, O my God, where, O Lord, or when

was I, your servant, ever innocent? But see now, I pass over that period, for what have I to do with a time from which I can recall no memories?

Augustine's Childhood

8. Did I not, then, as I grew out of infancy, come next to boyhood, or rather did it not come to me and succeed my infancy? My infancy did not go away (for where would it go?). It was simply no longer present; and I was no longer an infant who could not speak, but now a chattering boy. I remember this, and I have since observed how I learned to speak. My elders did not teach me words by rote, as they taught me my letters afterward. But I myself, when I was unable to communicate all I wished to say to whomever I wished by means of whimperings and grunts and various gestures of my limbs (which I used to reinforce my demands), I myself repeated the sounds already stored in my memory by the mind which you, O my God, gave me. When they called something by name and pointed it out while they spoke, I saw it and realized that the thing they wished to indicate was called by the name they then uttered. And what they meant was made plain by the gestures of their bodies, by a kind of natural language, common to all nations, which expresses itself through changes of countenance, glances of the eye, gestures and intonations which indicate a disposition and attitude—either to seek or to possess, to reject or to avoid. So it was that by frequently hearing words, in different phrases, I gradually identified the objects which the words stood for and, having formed my mouth to repeat these signs, I was thereby able to express my will. Thus I exchanged with those about me the verbal signs by which we express our wishes and advanced deeper into the stormy fellowship of human life, depending all the while upon the authority of my parents and the behest of my elders.

Going to School

9. O my God! What miseries and mockeries did I then experience when it was impressed on me that obedience to my teachers was proper to my boyhood condition if I was to succeed in this world and distinguish myself in those tricks of speech which would gain honor for me among men, and deceitful riches! To this end I was sent to school to get learning, the value of which I knew not—wretch that I was. Yet if I was slow to learn, I was flogged. For this was deemed praiseworthy by our forefathers and many had passed before us in the same course, and thus had built up the precedent for the sorrowful road on which we too were compelled to travel, multiplying labor and sorrow upon the sons of Adam. About this time, O Lord, I observed men praying to you, and I learned from them to conceive you—after my capacity for understanding as it was then—to be some great Being, who, though not visible to our senses, was able to hear and help us. Thus as a boy I began to pray to you, my Help and my Refuge, and, in calling on you, broke the bands of my tongue. Small as I was, I prayed with no slight earnestness that I might not be beaten at school. And when you did not heed me—for that would have been giving me over to my folly—my elders and even my parents too, who wished me no ill, treated my beatings as a joke, though they were then a great and grievous torment to me.

Is there anyone, O Lord, with a spirit so great, who cleaves to you with such steadfast affection (or is there even a kind of obtuseness that has the same effect)—is there any man who, by cleaving devoutly to you, is endowed with so great a courage that he can regard indifferently those racks and hooks and other torture weapons from which men throughout the world pray so fervently to be spared; and can they scorn those who so greatly fear these torments, just as my parents were amused at the torments with which our teachers punished us boys? For we were no less afraid of our pains, nor did we beg you less to escape them. Yet, even so, we were sinning by writing or reading or studying less than our assigned lessons.

For I did not, O Lord, lack memory or capacity, for, by you will, I possessed enough for my

age. However, my mind was absorbed only in play, and I was punished for this by those who were doing the same things themselves. But the idling of our elders is called business; the idling of boys, yough quite like it, is punished by those same elders, and no one pities either the boys or the men. For will any common sense observer agree that I was rightly punished as a boy for playing ball--just because this hindered me from learning more quickly those lessons by means of which, as a man, I could play at more shameful games? And did he by whom I was beaten do anything different? When he was worsted in some small controversy with a fellow teacher, he was more tormented by anger and envy than I was when beaten by a playmate in the ball game.

10. And yet I sinned, O Lord my God, you ruler and creator of all natural things—but of sins only the ruler—I sinned, O Lord my God, in acting against the precepts of my parents and of those teachers. For this learning which they wished me to acquire—no matter what their motives were—I might have put to good account afterward. I disobeyed them, not because I had chosen a better way, but from a sheer love of play. I loved the vanity of victory, and I loved to have my ears tickled with lying fables, which made them itch even more ardently, and a similar curiosity glowed more and more in my eyes for the shows and sports of my elders. Yet those who put on such shows are held in such high repute that almost all desire the same for their children. They are therefore willing to have them beaten, if their childhood games keep them from the studies by which their parents desire them to grow up to be able to give such shows. Look down on these things with mercy, O Lord, and deliver us who now call upon you; deliver those also who do not call upon you, that they may call upon you, and you may deliver them.

The Development of Faith

11. Even as a boy I had heard of eternal life promised to us through the humility of the Lord our God, who came down to visit us in our pride, and I was signed with the sign of his cross, and was seasoned with his salt even from the womb of my mother, who greatly trusted in you. You saw, O Lord, how, once, while I was still a child, I was suddenly seized with stomach pains and was at the point of death—you did see, O my God, for even then you were my keeper, with what agitation and with what faith I solicited from the piety of my mother and from your Church (which is the mother of us all) the baptism of your Christ, my Lord and my God. The mother of my flesh was much perplexed, for, with a heare pure in your faith, she was always in deep anguish for my eternal salvation. If I had not quickly recovered, she would have made arrangements immediately for my initiation and washing by your life-giving sacraments, confessing you, O Lord Jesus, for the forgiveness of sins. So my cleansing was deferred, as if it were inevitable that, if I should live, I would be further polluted; and, further, because the guilt contracted by sin after baptism would be still greater and more perilous.

Thus, at that time, I “believed” along with my mother and the whole household, except my father. But he did not overcome the influence of my mother’s piety in me, nor did he prevent my believing in Christ, although he had not yet believed in him. For it was her desire, O my God, that I should acknowledge you as my Father rather than him. In this you aided her to overcome her husband, to whom, though his superior, she yielded obedience. In this way she also yielded obedience to you, who so command.

I ask you, O my God, for I would gladly know if it be your will, to what good end my baptism was deferred at that time? Was it indeed for my good that the reins were slackened, as it were, to encourage me in sin? Or, were they not slackened? If not, then why is it still dinned into our ears on all sides, “Let him alone, let him do as he pleases, for he is not yet baptized”? In the matter of bodily health, no one says, “Let him alone; let him be worse wounded; for he is not yet cured”! How much better, then, would it have been for me to have been cured at once—and if thereafter, through the diligent care of friends and myself, my soul’s restored health had been kept safe in your keeping, who gave it in the first place! This would have been far better,

in truth. But how many and great the waves of temptation which appeared to hang over me as I grew out of childhood! These were foreseen by my mother, and she preferred that the unformed clay should be risked to them rather than the clay molded after Christ's image.

Studying Latin and Greek

12. But in this time of childhood—which was far less dreaded for me than my adolescence—I had no love of learning, and hated to be driven to it. Yet I was driven to it just the same, and good was done for me, even though I did not do it well, for I would not have learned if I had not been forced to it. For no man does well against his will, even if what he does is a good thing. Neither did they who forced me do well, but the good that was done me came from you, my God. For they did not care about the way in which I would use what they forced me to learn, and took it for granted that it was to satisfy the inordinate desires of a rich beggary and a shameful glory. But you, Lord, by whom the hairs of our head are numbered, did use for my good the error of all who pushed me on to study: but my error in not being willing to learn you did use for my punishment. And I—though so small a boy yet so great a sinner—was not punished without warrant. Thus by the instrumentality of those who did not do well, you did well for me; and by my own sin you did justly punish me. For it is even as you hast ordained: that every inordinate affection brings on its own punishment.

13. But what were the causes for my strong dislike of Greek literature, which I studied from my boyhood? Even to this day I have not fully understood them. For Latin I loved exceedingly—not just the rudiments, but what the grammarians teach. For those beginner's lessons in reading, writing, and reckoning, I considered no less a burden and pain than Greek. Yet where did this come from, unless from the sin and vanity of this life? For I was "but flesh, a wind that passes away and comes not again." Those first lessons were better, assuredly, because they were more certain, and through them I acquired, and still retain, the power of reading what I find written and of writing for myself what I will. In the other subjects, however, I was compelled to learn about the wanderings of a certain Aeneas, oblivious of my own wanderings, and to weep for Dido dead, who slew herself for love. And all this while I bore with dry eyes my own wretched self dying to you, O God, my life, in the midst of these things.

For what can be more wretched than the wretch who has no pity upon himself, who sheds tears over Dido, dead for the love of Aeneas, but who sheds no tears for his own death in not loving you, O God, light of my heare, and bread of the inner mouth of my soul, O power that links together my mind with my inmost thoughts? I did not love you, and thus committed fornication against you. Those around me, also sinning, thus cried out: "Well done! Well done!" The friendship of this world is fornication against you; and "Well done! Well done!" is cried until one feels ashamed not to show himself a man in this way. For my own condition I shed no tears, though I wept for Dido, who "sought death at the sword's point," while I myself was seeking the lowest rung of your creation, having forsaken you; eareh sinking back to eareh again. And, if I had been forbidden to read these poems, I would have grieved that I was not allowed to read what grieved me. This sort of madness is considered more honorable and more fruitful learning than the beginner's course in which I learned to read and write.

But now, O my God, cry unto my soul, and let your truth say to me: "Not so, not so! That first learning was far better." For, obviously, I would rather forget the wanderings of Aeneas, and all such things, than forget how to write and read. Still, over the entrance of the grammar school there hangs a veil. This is not so much the sign of a covering for a mystery as a curtain for error. Let them exclaim against me—those I no longer fear—while I confess to you, my God, what my soul desires, and let me find some rest, for in blaming my own evil ways I may come to love your holy ways. Neither let those cry out against me who buy and sell the baubles of literature. For if I ask them if it is true, as the poet says, that Aeneas once came to Carehage, the unlearned will reply that they do not know and the learned will deny that it is

true. But if I ask with what letters the name Aeneas is written, all who have ever learned this will answer correctly, in accordance with the conventional understanding men have agreed upon as to these signs. Again, if I should ask which would cause the greatest inconvenience in our life, if it were forgotten: reading and writing, or these poetical fictions, who does not see what everyone would answer who had not entirely lost his own memory? I erred, then, when as a boy I preferred those vain studies to these more profitable ones, or rather loved the one and hated the other. “One and one are two, two and two are four”: this was then a truly hateful song to me. But the wooden horse full of its armed soldiers, and the holocaust of Troy, and the spectral image of Creusa were all a most delightful—and vain—show!

14. But why, then, did I dislike Greek learning, which was full of such tales? For Homer was skillful in inventing such poetic fictions and is most sweetly wanton; yet when I was a boy, he was most disagreeable to me. I believe that Virgil would have the same effect on Greek boys as Homer did on me if they were forced to learn him. For the tedium of learning a foreign language mingled gall into the sweetness of those Grecian myths. For I did not understand a word of the language, and yet I was driven with threats and cruel punishments to learn it. There was also a time when, as an infant, I knew no Latin; but this I acquired without any fear or tormenting, but merely by being alert to the blandishments of my nurses, the jests of those who smiled on me, and the sportiveness of those who toyed with me. I learned all this, indeed, without being urged by any pressure of punishment, for my own heart urged me to bring forth its own fashioning, which I could not do except by learning words: not from those who taught me but those who talked to me, into whose ears I could pour forth whatever I could fashion. From this it is sufficiently clear that a free curiosity is more effective in learning than a discipline based on fear. Yet, by your ordinance, O God, discipline is given to restrain the excesses of freedom; this ranges from the ferule of the schoolmaster to the trials of the martyr and has the effect of mingling for us a wholesome bitterness, which calls us back to you from the poisonous pleasures that first drew us from you.

15. Hear my prayer, O Lord; let not my soul faint under your discipline, nor let me faint in confessing unto you your mercies, whereby you saved me from all my most wicked ways till you should become sweet to me beyond all the allurements that I used to follow. Let me come to love you wholly, and grasp your hand with my whole heart that you may deliver me from every temptation, even unto the last. And thus, O Lord, my King and my God, may all things useful that I learned as a boy now be offered in your service—let it be that for your service I now speak and write and reckon. For when I was learning vain things, you did impose your discipline upon me: and you forgave me my sin of delighting in those vanities. In those studies I learned many a useful word, but these might have been learned in matters not so vain; and surely that is the safe way for youths to walk in.

The Problem of Secular Education

16. But woe unto you, O torrent of human custom! Who shall stay your course? When will you ever run dry? How long will you carry down the sons of Eve into that vast and hideous ocean, which even those who have the Tree (for an ark) can scarcely pass over? Do I not read in you the stories of Jove the thunderer—and the adulterer? How could he be both? But so it says, and the sham thunder served as a cloak for him to play at real adultery. Yet which of our gowned masters will give a tempered hearing to a man trained in their own schools who cries out and says: “These were Homer’s fictions; he transfers things human to the gods. I could have wished that he would transfer divine things to us.” But it would have been more true if he said, “These are, indeed, his fictions, but he attributed divine attributes to sinful men, that crimes might not be accounted crimes, and that whoever committed such crimes might appear to imitate the celestial gods and not abandoned men.”

And yet, O torrent of hell, the sons of men are still cast into you, and they pay fees for

learning all these things. And much is made of it when this goes on in the forum under the auspices of laws which give a salary over and above the fees. And you beat against your rocky shore and roar: "Here words may be learned; here you can attain the eloquence which is so necessary to persuade people to your way of thinking; so helpful in unfolding your opinions." Certainly, they seem to argue that we should never have understood these words, "golden shower," "bosom," "intrigue," "highest heavens," and other such words, if Terence had not introduced a good-for-nothing youth upon the stage, setting up a picture of Jove as his example of lewdness and telling the tale

"Of Jove's descending in a golden shower
Into Danae's bosom...
With a woman to intrigue."

See how he excites himself to lust, as if by a heavenly authority, when he says:

"Great Jove,
Who shakes the highest heavens with his thunder;
Shall I, poor mortal man, not do the same?
I've done it, and with all my heare, I'm glad."³²

These words are not learned one whit more easily because of this vileness, but through them the vileness is more boldly perpetrated. I do not blame the words, for they are, as it were, choice and precious vessels, but I do deplore the wine of error which was poured out to us by teachers already drunk. And, unless we also drank we were beaten, without liberty of appeal to a sober judge. And yet, O my God, in whose presence I can now with security recall this, I learned these things willingly and with delight, and for it I was called a boy of good promise.

17. Bear with me, O my God, while I speak a little of those talents, your gifts, and of the follies on which I wasted them. For a lesson was given me that sufficiently disturbed my soul, for in it there was both hope of praise and fear of shame or stripes. The assignment was that I should declaim the words of Juno, as she raged and sorrowed that she could not "Bar off Italy / From all the approaches of the Teucric king."

I had learned that Juno had never uttered these words. Yet we were compelled to stray in the footsteps of these poetic fictions, and to turn into prose what the poet had said in verse. In the declamation, the boy won most applause who most strikingly reproduced the passions of anger and sorrow according to the "character" of the persons presented and who clothed it all in the most suitable language. What is it now to me, O my true Life, my God, that my declaiming was applauded above that of many of my classmates and fellow students? Actually, was not all that smoke and wind? Besides, was there nothing else on which I could have exercised my wit and tongue? Your praise, O Lord, your praises might have propped up the tendrils of my heare by your Scriptures; and it would not have been dragged away by these empty trifles, a shameful prey to the spirits of the air. For there is more than one way in which men sacrifice to the fallen angels.

18. But it was no wonder that I was thus carried toward vanity and was estranged from you, O my God, when men were held up as models to me who, when relating a deed of theirs—not in itself evil—were covered with confusion if found guilty of a barbarism or a solecism; but who could tell of their own licentiousness and be applauded for it, so long as they did it in a full and ornate oration of well-chosen words. You see all this, O Lord, and dost keep silence—"long-suffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth" as you are. Wilt you keep silence forever? Even now you draw from that vast deep the soul that seeks you and thirsts after your delight, whose "hear said about you, 'I have sought your face; your face, Lord, will I seek.'" For I was far from your face in the dark shadows of passion. For it is not by our feet, nor by change of place, that

we either turn from you or return to you. That younger son did not chareer horses or chariots, or ships, or fly away on visible wings, or journey by walking so that in the far country he might prodigally waste all that you did give him when he set out. A kind Father when you gave; and kinder still when he returned destitute! To be wanton, that is to say, to be darkened in heart—this is to be far from your face.

Look down, O Lord God, and see patiently, as you are wont to do, how diligently the sons of men observe the conventional rules of letters and syllables, taught them by those who learned their letters beforehand, while they neglect the eternal rules of everlasting salvation taught by you. They carry it so far that if he who practices or teaches the established rules of pronunciation should speak (contrary to grammatical usage) without aspirating the first syllable of “*hominem*” [“*ominem*,” and thus make it “a ‘uman being’”], he will offend men more than if he, a human being, were to hate another human being contrary to your commandments. It is as if he should feel that there is an enemy who could be more destructive to himself than that hatred which excites him against his fellow man; or that he could destroy him whom he hates more completely than he destroys his own soul by this same hatred. Now, obviously, there is no knowledge of letters more innate than the writing of conscience—against doing unto another what one would not have done to himself.

How mysterious you are, who “dwell on high” in silence. O you, the only great God, who by an unwearied law hurls down the penalty of blindness to unlawful desire! When a man seeking the reputation of eloquence stands before a human judge, while a thronging multitude surrounds him, and inveighs against his enemy with the most fierce hatred, he takes most vigilant heed that his tongue does not slip in a grammatical error, for example, and say *inter hominibus* [instead of *inter homines*], but he takes no heed lest, in the fury of his spirit, he cut off a man from his fellow men [*ex hominibus*].

These were the customs in the midst of which I was cast, an unhappy boy. This was the wrestling arena in which I was more fearful of perpetrating a barbarism than, having done so, of envying those who had not. These things I declare and confess to you, my God. I was applauded by those whom I then thought it my whole duty to please, for I did not perceive the gulf of infamy wherein I was cast away from your eyes.

For in your eyes, what was more infamous than I was already, since I displeased even my own kind and deceived, with endless lies, my tutor, my masters and parents—all from a love of play, a craving for frivolous spectacles, a stage-struck restlessness to imitate what I saw in these shows? I pilfered from my parents’ cellar and table, sometimes driven by gluttony, sometimes just to have something to give to other boys in exchange for their baubles, which they were prepared to sell even though they liked them as well as I. Moreover, in this kind of play, I often sought dishonest victories, being myself conquered by the vain desire for pre-eminence. And what was I so unwilling to endure, and what was it that I censured so violently when I caught anyone, except the very things I did to others? And, when I was myself detected and censured, I preferred to quarrel rather than to yield. Is this the innocence of childhood? It is not, O Lord, it is not. I entreat your mercy, O my God, for these same sins as we grow older are transferred from tutors and masters; they pass from nuts and balls and sparrows, to magistrates and kings, to gold and lands and slaves, just as the rod is succeeded by more severe chastisements. It was, then, the fact of humility in childhood that you, O our King, did approve as a symbol of humility when you said, “Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

19. In Praise of God

However, O Lord, to you most excellent and most good, you Architect and Governor of the universe, thanks would be due you, O our God, even if you had not willed that I should survive my boyhood. For I existed even then; I lived and felt and was solicitous about my own well-being—a trace of that most mysterious unity from whence I had my being.³⁹ I kept watch,

by my inner sense, over the integrity of my outer senses, and even in these trifles and also in my thoughts about trifles, I learned to take pleasure in truth. I was averse to being deceived; I had a vigorous memory; I was gifted with the power of speech, was softened by friendship, shunned sorrow, meanness, ignorance. Is not such an animated creature as this wonderful and praiseworthy? But all these are gifts of my God; I did not give them to myself. Moreover, they are good, and they all together constitute myself. Good, then, is he that made me, and he is my God; and before him will I rejoice exceedingly for every good gift which, even as a boy, I had. But herein lay my sin, that it was not in him, but in his creatures—myself and the rest—that I sought for pleasures, honors, and truths. And I fell thereby into sorrows, troubles, and errors. Thanks be to you, my joy, my pride, my confidence, my God—thanks be to you for your gifts; but do you preserve them in me. For thus wilt you preserve me; and those things which you hast given me shall be developed and perfected, and I myself shall be with you, for from you is my being.

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