

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



SAINT AUGUSTINE

*Confessions*



*Translated with an Introduction and Notes by*  
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OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
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Published in the United States  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

Translation, Introduction, and Notes © Henry Chadwick 1991

Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published as a World's Classics paperback 1992  
Reissued as an Oxford World's Classics paperback 1998  
Reissued 2008

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-953782-2

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Printed in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

## BOOK I

### *Early Years*

i (1) 'You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised (Ps. 47: 2): great is your power and your wisdom is immeasurable' (Ps. 146:5). Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you, a human being 'bearing his mortality with him' (2 Cor. 4: 10), carrying with him the witness of his sin and the witness that you 'resist the proud' (1 Pet. 5:5). Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.<sup>1</sup>

'Grant me Lord to know and understand' (Ps. 118: 34, 73, 144) which comes first—to call upon you or to praise you, and whether knowing you precedes calling upon you. But who calls upon you when he does not know you? For an ignorant person might call upon someone else instead of the right one. But surely you may be called upon in prayer that you may be known. Yet 'how shall they call upon him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe without a preacher?' (Rom. 10: 14). 'They will praise the Lord who seek for him' (Ps. 21: 27).

In seeking him they find him, and in finding they will praise him. Lord, I would seek you, calling upon you—and calling upon you is an act of believing in you. You have been preached to us. My faith, Lord, calls upon you. It is your gift to me. You breathed it into me by the humanity of your Son, by the ministry of your preacher.<sup>2</sup>

ii (2) How shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord? Surely when I call on him, I am calling on him to come into me. But what place is there in me where my God can enter into me? 'God made heaven and earth' (Gen. 1: 1). Where may he come to me? Lord my God, is there any room in me which can contain you? Can heaven

<sup>1</sup> For Plotinus (6. 7. 23. 4) the soul finds rest only in the One. Augustine's sentence announces a major theme of his work.

<sup>2</sup> Probably Ambrose (as in Augustine's letter 147. 52) rather than Christ; i.e. the two phrases are contrasting, not parallel and equivalent. That the humanity of Christ is an example of faith is common in Augustine. See below, x. xliii (68).

and earth, which you have made and in which you have made me, contain you? Without you, whatever exists would not exist. Then can what exists contain you? I also have being. So why do I request you to come to me when, unless you were within me, I would have no being at all? I am not now possessed by Hades; yet even there are you (Ps. 138: 8): for 'even if I were to go down to Hades, you would be present'. Accordingly, my God, I would have no being, I would not have any existence, unless you were in me. Or rather, I would have no being if I were not in you 'of whom are all things, through whom are all things, in whom are all things' (Rom. 11: 36). Even so, Lord, even so. How can I call on you to come if I am already in you? Or where can you come from so as to be in me? Can I move outside heaven and earth so that my God may come to me from there? For God has said 'I fill heaven and earth' (Jer. 23: 24).

iii (3) Do heaven and earth contain you because you have filled them? or do you fill them and overflow them because they do not contain you? Where do you put the overflow of yourself after heaven and earth are filled? Or have you, who contain all things, no need to be contained by anything because what you will you fill by containing it? We cannot think you are given coherence by vessels full of you, because even if they were to be broken, you would not be spilt. When you are 'poured out' (Joel 2: 28) upon us, you are not wasted on the ground. You raise us upright. You are not scattered but reassemble us. In filling all things, you fill them all with the whole of yourself.

Is it that because all things cannot contain the whole of you, they contain part of you, and that all things contain the same part of you simultaneously? Or does each part contain a different part of you, the larger containing the greater parts, the lesser parts the smaller? Does that imply that there is some part of you which is greater, another part smaller? Or is the whole of you everywhere, yet without anything that contains you entire?<sup>3</sup>

iv (4) Who then are you, my God? What, I ask, but God who is Lord? For 'who is the Lord but the Lord', or 'who is God but our God?' (Ps. 17: 32). Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most

<sup>3</sup> Plotinus (6. 4-5) devoted a treatise to the question of the omnipresence of being. Closely parallel is Plotinus 5. 5. 9.

intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making everything new and 'leading' the proud 'to be old without their knowledge' (Job 9: 5, Old Latin version); always active, always in repose, gathering to yourself but not in need, supporting and filling and protecting, creating and nurturing and bringing to maturity, searching even though to you nothing is lacking: you love without burning, you are jealous in a way that is free of anxiety, you 'repent' (Gen. 6: 6) without the pain of regret, you are wrathful and remain tranquil. You will a change without any change in your design. You recover what you find, yet have never lost. Never in any need, you rejoice in your gains (Luke 15: 7); you are never avaricious, yet you require interest (Matt. 25: 27). We pay you more than you require so as to make you our debtor, yet who has anything which does not belong to you? (1 Cor. 4: 7). You pay off debts, though owing nothing to anyone; you cancel debts and incur no loss. But in these words what have I said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What has anyone achieved in words when he speaks about you? Yet woe to those who are silent about you because, though loquacious with verbosity,<sup>4</sup> they have nothing to say.

v (5) Who will enable me to find rest in you? Who will grant me that you come to my heart and intoxicate it, so that I forget my evils and embrace my one and only good, yourself? What are you to me? Have mercy so that I may find words. What am I to you that you command me to love you, and that, if I fail to love you, you are angry with me and threaten me with vast miseries? If I do not love you, is that but a little misery? What a wretch I am! In your mercies, Lord God, tell me what you are to me. 'Say to my soul, I am your salvation' (Ps. 34: 3). Speak to me so that I may hear. See the ears of my heart are before you, Lord. Open them and 'say to my soul, I am your salvation.' After that utterance I will run and lay hold on you. Do not hide your face from me (cf. Ps. 26: 9). Lest I die, let me die so that I may see it.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 'The loquacious' are regularly either pagan philosophical critics rejecting the Christian revelation or Manichees. The problematic nature of all human talk about God is stated by Plotinus 5. 3. 14 (we say what he is not, not what he is; if we can say what is true, that is by mantic inspiration).

<sup>5</sup> None can see God's face and live (Exod. 33: 20); yet the heavenly vision is life. For the epigram 'let me die lest I die' Augustine has a parallel in a sermon (231,3): 'Let me die (to sin) lest I die (in hell).' Cf. also below, II. ii (4).

(6) The house of my soul is too small for you to come to it. May it be enlarged by you. It is in ruins: restore it. In your eyes it has offensive features. I admit it, I know it; but who will clean it up? Or to whom shall I cry other than you? 'Cleanse me from my secret faults, Lord, and spare your servant from sins to which I am tempted by others' (Ps. 31: 5). 'I believe and therefore I speak' (Ps. 115: 10). 'Lord, you know' (Ps. 68: 6). Have I not openly accused myself of 'my faults', my God, and 'you forgave me the iniquity of my heart' (Ps. 31: 5). I do not 'contend with you in a court of law' (Job 9: 3), for you are the truth. I do not deceive myself 'lest my iniquity lie to itself' (Ps. 26: 12). Therefore I do not contend with you like a litigant because, 'if you take note of iniquities, Lord, who shall stand?' (Ps. 129: 3).

vi (7) Nevertheless allow me to speak before your mercy, though I am but dust and ashes (Gen. 18: 27). Allow me to speak: for I am addressing your mercy, not a man who would laugh at me. Perhaps even you deride me (cf. Ps. 2: 4), but you will turn and have mercy on me (Jer. 12: 15). What, Lord, do I wish to say except that I do not know whence I came to be in this mortal life or, as I may call it, this living death?<sup>6</sup> I do not know where I came from.<sup>7</sup> But the consolations of your mercies (cf. Ps. 50: 3; 93: 19) upheld me, as I have heard from the parents of my flesh, him from whom and her in whom you formed me in time. For I do not remember. So I was welcomed by the consolations of human milk; but it was not my mother or my nurses who made any decision to fill their breasts, but you who through them gave me infant food, in accordance with your ordinance and the riches which are distributed deep in the natural order. You also granted me not to wish for more than you were giving, and to my nurses the desire to give me what you gave them. For by an impulse which you control their instinctive wish was to give me the milk which they had in abundance from you. For the good which came to me from them was a good for them; yet it

<sup>6</sup> Echo of Lucretius 3. 869; Euripides quoted by Plato, *Gorgias* 492e: 'who knows if being alive is really being dead, and being dead is being alive?'

<sup>7</sup> On the origin of the soul's union with the body and on the possibility of pre-existence, Augustine is always unwilling to make any decision: see IX. xi (37). The Platonic doctrine of the soul's pre-existence and fall into the prison of the body is never affirmed. Nevertheless, the possibility of pre-existence is also not denied, and especially in *Confessions* XI–XII the language used of the soul's lapse from a divine eternity to the disruptive successiveness of temporal things is very close to Plotinus.

all, so that my innocence should not lead my companions to scorn my lack of courage, and lest my chastity be taken as a mark of inferiority.<sup>9</sup>

(8) Such were the companions with whom I made my way through the streets of Babylon.<sup>10</sup> With them I rolled in its dung as if rolling in spices and precious ointments (S. of S. 5. 4: 14). To tie me down the more tenaciously to Babylon's belly, the invisible enemy trampled on me (Ps. 55: 3) and seduced me because I was in the mood to be seduced. The mother of my flesh already had fled from the centre of Babylon (Jer. 51: 6), but still lingered in the outskirts of the city. Although she had warned me to guard my virginity, she did not seriously pay heed to what her husband had told her about me, and which she felt to hold danger for the future: for she did not seek to restrain my sexual drive within the limit of the marriage bond, if it could not be cut back to the quick. The reason why she showed no such concern was that she was afraid that the hope she placed in me could be impeded by a wife. This was not the hope which my mother placed in you for the life to come, but the hope which my parents entertained for my career that I might do well out of the study of literature. Both of them, as I realized, were very ambitious for me: my father because he hardly gave a thought to you at all, and his ambitions for me were concerned with mere vanities; my mother because she thought it would do no harm and would be a help to set me on the way towards you, if I studied the traditional pattern of a literary education. That at least is my conjecture as I try to recall the characters of my parents.

The reins were relaxed to allow me to amuse myself. There was no strict discipline to keep me in check, which led to an unbridled dissoluteness in many different directions. In all of this there was a thick mist shutting me off from the brightness of your face, my God, and my iniquity as it were 'burst out from my fatness' (Ps. 72: 7).

iv (9) Theft receives certain punishment by your law (Exod. 20: 15), Lord, and by the law written in the hearts of men (Rom. 2: 14) which not even iniquity itself destroys. For what thief can with

<sup>9</sup> The theme of this paragraph is found in Ambrose, *Noah* 22, 81.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine's portrait of his wild years may be compared with the savage contemporary portrait of the riff-raff of Rome about 380 by the pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus, who speaks of people spending their entire lives on alcohol, gambling, brothels, and public shows (28. 4. 28).

equanimity endure being robbed by another thief? He cannot tolerate it even if he is rich and the other is destitute. I wanted to carry out an act of theft and did so, driven by no kind of need other than my inner lack of any sense of, or feeling for, justice. Wickedness filled me. I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong. There was a pear tree near our vineyard laden with fruit, though attractive in neither colour nor taste. To shake the fruit off the tree and carry off the pears, I and a gang of naughty adolescents set off late at night after (in our usual pestilential way) we had continued our game in the streets. We carried off a huge load of pears. But they were not for our feasts but merely to throw to the pigs. Even if we ate a few, nevertheless our pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed.

Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart. You had pity on it when it was at the bottom of the abyss. Now let my heart tell you what it was seeking there in that I became evil for no reason.<sup>11</sup> I had no motive for my wickedness except wickedness itself. It was foul, and I loved it. I loved the self-destruction, I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen but my fall itself. My depraved soul leaped down from your firmament to ruin.<sup>12</sup> I was seeking not to gain anything by shameful means, but shame for its own sake.

v (10) There is beauty in lovely physical objects, as in gold and silver and all other such things. When the body touches such things, much significance attaches to the rapport of the object with the touch. Each of the other senses has its own appropriate mode of response to physical things. Temporal honour and the power of giving orders and of being in command have their own kind of dignity, though this is also the origin of the urge to self-assertion. Yet in the acquisition of all these sources of social status, one must not depart from you, Lord, nor deviate from your law. The life which we live in this world has its attractiveness because of a certain measure in its beauty and its harmony with all these inferior objects that are beautiful. Human friendship is also a nest of love and gentleness because of the unity it brings about between

<sup>11</sup> Echo of Sallust's language about Catiline. Augustine presents himself as a new Catiline.

<sup>12</sup> Like Lucifer.

many souls. Yet sin is committed for the sake of all these things and others of this kind when, in consequence of an immoderate urge towards those things which are at the bottom end of the scale of good,<sup>13</sup> we abandon the higher and supreme goods, that is you, Lord God, and your truth and your law (Ps. 118: 142). These inferior goods have their delights, but not comparable to my God who has made them all. It is in him that the just person takes delight; he is the joy of those who are true of heart (Ps. 63: 11).

(11) When a crime is under investigation to discover the motive for which it was done, the accusation is not usually believed except in cases where the appetite to obtain (or the fear of losing) one of those goods which we have called inferior appears a plausible possibility. They are beautiful and attractive even if, in comparison with the higher goods which give true happiness, they are mean and base. A man committed murder. Why? Because he loved another's wife or his property; or he wanted to acquire money to live on by plundering his goods; or he was afraid of losing his own property by the action of his victim; or he had suffered injury and burned with desire for revenge. No one would commit murder without a motive, merely because he took pleasure in killing. Who would believe that? It was said of one brutal and cruel man [Catiline] that he was evil and savage without reason.<sup>14</sup> Yet the preceding passage gave the motive: 'lest disuse might make his hand or mind slow to react'. Why did he wish for that? Why so? His objective was to capture the city by violent crimes to obtain honours, government, and wealth; to live without fear of the laws and without the difficulty of attaining his ambitions because of the poverty of his family estate and his known criminal record. No, not even Catiline himself loved his crimes; something else motivated him to commit them.

vi (12) Wretch that I was, what did I love in you, my act of theft, that crime which I did at night in the sixteenth year of my life? There was nothing beautiful about you, my thieving. Indeed do you exist at all for me to be addressing you?

The fruit which we stole was beautiful because it was your creation, most beautiful of all Beings, maker of all things, the good

<sup>13</sup> Throughout his writings Augustine holds to a doctrine of gradations of goodness. The good of the body is inferior to that of the soul; the will, in itself midway, may turn to higher or to lower things, and may err by preferring inferior goods to superior.

<sup>14</sup> Sallust, *Catiline* 16 (also cited by Augustine, *Sermon on Ps. 108*, 3).

God, God the highest good and my true good. The fruit was beautiful, but was not that which my miserable soul coveted. I had a quantity of better pears. But those I picked solely with the motive of stealing. I threw away what I had picked. My feasting was only on the wickedness which I took pleasure in enjoying. If any of those pears entered my mouth, my criminality was the piquant sauce. And now, Lord my God, I inquire what was the nature of my pleasure in the theft. The act has nothing lovely about it, none of the loveliness found in equity and prudence, or in the human mind whether in the memory or in the senses or in physical vitality. Nor was it beautiful in the way the stars are, noble in their courses, or earth and sea full of newborn creatures which, as they are born, take the place of those which die;<sup>15</sup> not even in the way that specious vices have a flawed reflection of beauty.

(13) Pride imitates what is lofty; but you alone are God most high above all things. What does ambition seek but honour and glory? Yet you alone are worthy of honour and are glorious for eternity. The cruelty of powerful people aims to arouse fear. Who is to be feared but God alone? What can be seized or stolen from his power? When or where or how or by whom? Soft endearments are intended to arouse love. But there are no caresses tenderer than your charity, and no object of love is more healthy than your truth, beautiful and luminous beyond all things. Curiosity appears to be a zeal for knowledge; yet you supremely know all. Ignorance and stupidity are given the names of simplicity and innocence; but there is no greater simplicity than in you. And what greater innocence than yours, whereas to evil men their own works are damaging? Idleness appears as desire for a quiet life; yet can rest be assured apart from the Lord? Luxury wants to be called abundance and satiety; but you are fullness and the inexhaustible treasure of incorruptible pleasure. Prodigality presents itself under the shadow of generosity; but you are the rich bestower of all good things. Avarice wishes to have large possessions; you possess everything. Envy contends about excellence; but what is more excellent than you? Anger seeks revenge; who avenges with greater justice than you? Fear quails before sudden and unexpected events attacking things which are

<sup>15</sup> Augustine regarded the cycle of birth and death as 'beautiful'; i.e. death is evil to the individual, not to the race.

loved, and takes precautions for their safety; to you is anything unexpected or sudden? Or who can take away from you what you love? There is no reliable security except with you. Regret wastes away for the loss of things which cupidity delighted in. Its wish would be that nothing be taken away, just as nothing can be taken from you.

(14) So the soul fornicates (Ps. 72: 27) when it is turned away from you and seeks outside you the pure and clear intentions which are not to be found except by returning to you. In their perverted way all humanity imitates you. Yet they put themselves at a distance from you and exalt themselves against you. But even by thus imitating you they acknowledge that you are the creator of all nature and so concede that there is no place where one can entirely escape from you. Therefore in that act of theft what was the object of my love, and in what way did I viciously and perversely imitate my Lord? Was my pleasure to break your law, but by deceit since I had not the power to do that by force? Was I acting like a prisoner with restricted liberty who does without punishment what is not permitted, thereby making an assertion of possessing a dim resemblance to omnipotence? Here is a runaway slave fleeing his master and pursuing a shadow (Job 7: 2). What rottenness! What a monstrous life and what an abyss of death! Was it possible to take pleasure in what was illicit for no reason other than that it was not allowed?

vii (15) "What shall I render to the Lord?" (Ps. 115: 2) who recalls these things to my memory, but my soul feels no fear from the recollection. I will love you, Lord, and I will give thanks and confession to your name because you have forgiven me such great evils and my nefarious deeds. I attribute to your grace and mercy that you have melted my sins away like ice (Ecclus. 3: 17). I also attribute to your grace whatever evil acts I have not done. What could I not have done when I loved gratuitous crime? I confess that everything has been forgiven, both the evil things I did of my own accord, and those which I did not do because of your guidance.

No one who considers his frailty would dare to attribute to his own strength his chastity and innocence, so that he has less cause to love you—as if he had less need of your mercy by which you forgive the sins of those converted to you. If man is called by you, follows your voice, and has avoided doing those acts which I am recalling

and avowing in my own life, he should not mock the healing of a sick man by the Physician, whose help has kept him from falling sick, or at least enabled him to be less gravely ill. He should love you no less, indeed even more; for he sees that the one who delivered me from the great sicknesses of my sins is also he through whom he may see that he himself has not been a victim of the same great sicknesses.

viii (16) 'What fruit had I, wretched boy, in these things (Rom. 6: 21) which I now blush to recall, above all in that theft in which I loved nothing but the theft itself? The theft itself was a nothing, and for that reason I was the more miserable. Yet had I been alone I would not have done it—I remember my state of mind to be thus at the time—alone I would never have done it. Therefore my love in that act was to be associated with the gang in whose company I did it. Does it follow that I loved something other than the theft? No, nothing else in reality because association with the gang is also a nothing. What is it in reality? Who can teach me that, but he who 'illuminates my heart' (Ecclus. 2: 10) and disperses the shadows in it? What else has stirred my mind to ask and discuss and consider this question? If I had liked the pears which I stole and actually desired to enjoy them, I could by myself have committed that wicked act, had it been enough to attain the pleasure which I sought. I would not have needed to inflame the itch of my cupidity through the excitement generated by sharing the guilt with others. But my pleasure was not in the pears; it was in the crime itself, done in association with a sinful group.

ix (17) What was my state of mind? It is quite certain that it was utterly shameful and a disgrace to me that I had it. Yet what was it? 'Who understands his sins?' (Job 10: 15). It was all done for a giggle, as if our hearts were tickled to think we were deceiving those who would not think us capable of such behaviour and would have profoundly disapproved. Why then did I derive pleasure from an act I would not have done on my own? Is it that nobody can easily laugh when alone? Certainly no one readily laughs when alone; yet sometimes laughter overcomes individuals when no one else is present if their senses or their mind perceive something utterly absurd. But alone I would not have done it, could not conceivably have done it by myself. See, before you, my God, the living memory of

my soul. Alone I would not have committed that crime, in which my pleasure lay not in what I was stealing but in the act of theft. But had I been alone, it would have given me absolutely no pleasure, nor would I have committed it. Friendship can be a dangerous enemy, a seduction of the mind lying beyond the reach of investigation.<sup>16</sup> Out of a game and a jest came an avid desire to do injury and an appetite to inflict loss on someone else without any motive on my part of personal gain, and no pleasure in settling a score. As soon as the words are spoken 'Let us go and do it', one is ashamed not to be shameless.

x (18) Who can untie this extremely twisted and tangled knot? It is a foul affair, I have no wish to give attention to it; I have no desire to contemplate it. My desire is for you, justice and innocence, you are lovely and splendid to honest eyes; the satiety of your love is insatiable. With you is utter peace and a life immune from disturbance. The person who enters into you 'enters into the joy of the Lord' (Matt. 25: 21), and will not be afraid; he will find himself in the supreme Good where it is supremely good to be. As an adolescent I went astray from you (Ps. 118: 76), my God, far from your unmoved stability. I became to myself a region of destitution.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Similarly IX. ii. (2).

<sup>17</sup> The Prodigal Son is fused with a Neoplatonic theme of the soul's destitution without God, which is taken up at the beginning of book III and again in VII. x (16). Destitution in the soul distant from God is a theme in Porphyry (*De abstinentia* 3. 27 and *Sententiae* 40), based on Plato's *Symposium*.

done simultaneously. They tear the mind apart by the mutual incompatibility of the wills—four or more according to the number of objects desired. Yet they do not usually affirm that there is such a multiplicity of diverse substances.

The same argument holds for good wills. For I ask them whether it is good to delight in a reading from the apostle, or if it is good to take pleasure in a sober psalm, or if it is good to discourse upon the gospel. In each case they will reply 'good'. What then? If all these offer equal delight at one and the same time, surely the divergent wills pull apart the human heart while we are deliberating which is the most attractive option to take? All are good and yet are in contention with each other until the choice falls on one to which is then drawn the entire single will which was split into many. So also when the delight of eternity draws us upwards and the pleasure of temporal good holds us down, the identical soul is not wholehearted in its desire for one or the other. It is torn apart in a painful condition, as long as it prefers the eternal because of its truth but does not discard the temporal because of familiarity.

xi (25) Such was my sickness and my torture, as I accused myself even more bitterly than usual. I was twisting and turning in my chain until it would break completely: I was now only a little bit held by it, but I was still held. You, Lord, put pressure on me in my hidden depths with a severe mercy wielding the double whip<sup>17</sup> of fear and shame, lest I should again succumb, and lest that tiny and tenuous bond which still remained should not be broken, but once more regain strength and bind me even more firmly. Inwardly I said to myself: Let it be now, let it be now. And by this phrase I was already moving towards a decision; I had almost taken it, and then I did not do so.<sup>18</sup> Yet I did not relapse into my original condition, but stood my ground very close to the point of deciding and recovered my breath. Once more I made the attempt and came only a little short of my goal; only a little short of it—yet I did not touch it or hold on to it. I was hesitating whether to die to death and to live to life. Ingrained evil had more hold over me than unaccustomed

<sup>17</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* 5. 547.

<sup>18</sup> Persius' fifth satire (quoted below VIII. xii (28)) portrays a lover who swears to give up his mistress but returns on her first appeal (5. 157). An epigram in the Greek Anthology (5. 24) concerns a lover whose conscience warns him to fly from his mistress but his will has not the strength.

good. The nearer approached the moment of time when I would become different, the greater the horror of it struck me. But it did not thrust me back nor turn me away, but left me in a state of suspense.

(26) Vain trifles and the triviality of the empty-headed, my old loves, held me back. They tugged at the garment of my flesh and whispered: 'Are you getting rid of us?' And 'from this moment we shall never be with you again, not for ever and ever'. And 'from this moment this and that are forbidden to you for ever and ever.' What they were suggesting in what I have called 'this and that'—what they were suggesting, my God, may your mercy avert from the soul of your servant! What filth, what disgraceful things they were suggesting! I was listening to them with much less than half my attention. They were not frankly confronting me face to face on the road, but as it were whispering behind my back, as if they were furtively tugging at me as I was going away, trying to persuade me to look back. Nevertheless they held me back. I hesitated to detach myself, to be rid of them, to make the leap to where I was being called. Meanwhile the overwhelming force of habit was saying to me: 'Do you think you can live without them?'

(27) Nevertheless it was now putting the question very half-heartedly. For from that direction where I had set my face and towards which I was afraid to move, there appeared the dignified and chaste Lady Contenance, serene and cheerful without coquetry, enticing me in an honourable manner to come and not to hesitate. To receive and embrace me she stretched out pious hands, filled with numerous good examples for me to follow. There were large numbers of boys and girls, a multitude of all ages, young adults and grave widows and elderly virgins. In every one of them was Contenance herself, in no sense barren but 'the fruitful mother of children' (Ps. 112: 9), the joys born of you, Lord, her husband. And she smiled on me with a smile of encouragement as if to say: 'Are you incapable of doing what these men and women have done? Do you think them capable of achieving this by their own resources and not by the Lord their God? Their Lord God gave me to them. Why are you relying on yourself, only to find yourself unreliable? Cast yourself upon him, do not be afraid. He will not withdraw himself so that you fall. Make the leap without anxiety; he will catch you and heal you.'

I blushed with embarrassment because I was still listening to the mutterings of those vanities, and racked by hesitations I remained undecided. But once more it was as if she said: “Stop your ears to your impure members on earth and mortify them” (Col. 3: 5). They declare delights to you, but “not in accord with the law of the Lord your God” (Ps. 118: 85). This debate in my heart was a struggle of myself against myself. Alypius stood quite still at my side, and waited in silence for the outcome of my unprecedented state of agitation.

xii (28) From a hidden depth a profound self-examination had dredged up a heap of all my misery and set it ‘in the sight of my heart’ (Ps. 18: 15). That precipitated a vast storm bearing a massive downpour of tears. To pour it all out with the accompanying groans, I got up from beside Alypius (solitude seemed to me more appropriate for the business of weeping), and I moved further away to ensure that even his presence put no inhibition upon me. He sensed that this was my condition at that moment. I think I may have said something which made it clear that the sound of my voice was already choking with tears. So I stood up while in profound astonishment he remained where we were sitting. I threw myself down somehow under a certain figtree,<sup>19</sup> and let my tears flow freely. Rivers streamed from my eyes, a sacrifice acceptable to you (Ps. 50: 19), and (though not in these words, yet in this sense) I repeatedly said to you: ‘How long, O Lord? How long, Lord, will you be angry to the uttermost? Do not be mindful of our old iniquities.’ (Ps. 6: 4). For I felt my past to have a grip on me. It uttered wretched cries: ‘How long, how long is it to be?’ ‘Tomorrow, tomorrow.’<sup>20</sup> ‘Why not now? Why not an end to my impure life in this very hour?’

(29) As I was saying this and weeping in the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house<sup>21</sup> chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again ‘Pick up and read, pick up and read.’ At once my countenance changed, and I began to think intently whether there might be some sort of children’s game in which such

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps a symbolic reference to the figtree of Adam (Gen. 3: 7; cf. John 1: 48).

<sup>20</sup> Persius, *Satires* 5. 66.

<sup>21</sup> The oldest manuscript reads here ‘from the house of God’. The child’s voice is in any event a divine oracle to Augustine. The variant may echo Ps. 41: 5.

a chant is used. But I could not remember having heard of one. I checked the flood of tears and stood up. I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find. For I had heard how Antony happened to be present at the gospel reading, and took it as an admonition addressed to himself when the words were read: 'Go, sell all you have, give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me' (Matt. 19: 21).<sup>22</sup> By such an inspired utterance he was immediately 'converted to you' (Ps. 50: 15). So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: 'Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts' (Rom. 13: 13-14).

I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.

(30) Then I inserted my finger or some other mark in the book and closed it. With a face now at peace I told everything to Alypius. What had been going on in his mind, which I did not know, he disclosed in this way. He asked to see the text I had been reading. I showed him, and he noticed a passage following that which I had read. I did not know how the text went on; but the continuation was 'Receive the person who is weak in faith' (Rom. 14: 1). Alypius applied this to himself, and he made that known to me. He was given confidence by this admonition. Without any agony of hesitation he joined me in making a good resolution and affirmation of intention, entirely congruent with his moral principles in which he had long been greatly superior to me. From there we went in to my mother, and told her. She was filled with joy. We told her how it had happened. She exulted, feeling it to be a triumph, and blessed you who 'are powerful to do more than we ask or think' (Eph. 3: 20). She saw that you had granted her far more than she had long been praying for in her unhappy and tearful groans.

The effect of your converting me to yourself was that I did not

<sup>22</sup> Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 2.

now seek a wife and had no ambition for success in this world. I stood firm upon that rule of faith on which many years before you had revealed me to her.<sup>23</sup> You 'changed her grief into joy' (Ps. 29: 12) far more abundantly than she desired, far dearer and more chaste than she expected when she looked for grandchildren begotten of my body.

<sup>23</sup> See above, III. xi (19–20).