CHURCH HISTORY SERIES • LESSON 9

Augustine of Hippo

The architect of Western theology — a restless heart, a converted will, and the longest shadow in Latin Christianity • AD 354–430

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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Where this fits: Lesson 9 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — a supplementary lesson that deserves its own chapter. Augustine lived in the shadow of **Nicaea** and died as the church prepared for **Chalcedon**. Mark Noll does not give him a single chapter in *Turning Points*, but Noll readily grants that nearly every chapter after 430 stands on Augustine's shoulders. See the full **Series Timeline**.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

If you want to understand Western Christianity — Roman Catholicism and Protestantism alike, Latin theology, the modern idea of an "interior life," the doctrines of original sin, grace, and predestination, the "two cities" frame that every Christian political theology still either uses or reacts against — there is one North African bishop you have to read. His name was **Aurelius Augustinus**, bishop of the unremarkable port town of Hippo Regius on the Mediterranean coast of what is today Algeria. He lived from 354 to 430. He wrote more than any ancient Christian before him and more than nearly any after. Isidore of Seville, a century later, would write that anyone who claimed to have read everything Augustine wrote was a liar.

Luther, a Reformation-era Augustinian friar, would say that nearly everything he taught he had learned first from Augustine. Calvin quoted Augustine more than any other father. Aquinas

built his *Summa* largely out of Augustinian material. Roman Catholic and Protestant reformers in the sixteenth century would argue fiercely about many things — but they would argue inside an Augustinian frame both sides took for granted. This lesson is about the man who built that frame.

> Psalm 42:1 (ESV): "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God."
> *LXX (Ps 41:2): ὃν τρόπον ἐπιποθεῖ ἡ ἔλαφος ἐπὶ τὰς πηγὰς τῶν ὑδάτων, οὕτως ἐπιποθεῖ ἡ ψυχή μου πρὸς σέ, ὁ θεός.*

PART 1 — A LIFE ON THREE SHORES

354 • Born in **Thagaste** (modern Souk Ahras, Algeria), the inland hill town of a minor Roman province. His father Patricius was a pagan of modest means and hot temper. His mother **Monica** was a devout Christian who prayed for him, as she would for the next forty-three years, without giving up.

370–373 • Student at **Carthage**, the regional capital. Took a concubine whose name he never records but with whom he lived faithfully for thirteen years; she bore him a son, **Adeodatus** ("gift of God") in 372. At 19 read Cicero's *Hortensius*, which turned him toward the love of wisdom — but he found Scripture's style crude and was repelled. Joined the **Manichaeans**, a dualist gnostic-style sect (light vs. darkness, spiritual vs. material) that offered intellectual respectability. He remained a "hearer" in their church for nine years.

383–384 • Moved to **Rome**, then to **Milan** as the professor of rhetoric for the imperial court. His Manichaean confidence collapsed after he finally met their star teacher Faustus and found him shallow. He drifted through skepticism toward **Neoplatonism**, the sophisticated philosophy of Plotinus and Porphyry. Under the influence of Monica (who had followed him across the Mediterranean) and Bishop **Ambrose** of Milan, he began reading the Scriptures seriously for the first time.

386 • **Conversion** in a Milan garden. See Part 2.

387 • Baptized by Ambrose at the Easter Vigil. His son Adeodatus was baptized the same night. Monica died later that year at Ostia on the journey home, having lived to see her prayer answered.

388–391 • Returned to Thagaste. Adeodatus died young. Augustine formed a quasi-monastic community on the family estate.

391 • Visiting Hippo Regius on the coast, he was more or less conscripted — the congregation physically pressed him to be ordained priest. He wept publicly at his ordination.

395 • Consecrated **Bishop of Hippo**, an office he held for thirty-five years.

410 • **Alaric the Goth sacks Rome.** The unthinkable has happened. Pagan intellectuals blame Christianity for weakening the empire. Augustine begins to write the twenty-two books of *The City of God* in response. It will occupy him for thirteen years.

412–430 • Engages **Pelagius** and his followers in the most consequential doctrinal controversy of his life. See Part 5.

430 • Dies on **28 August**, while the Vandals are besieging Hippo. His last days are spent with the seven penitential psalms posted on the wall beside his bed, so he could read them as he prayed. Within a year Hippo falls; within a decade Carthage follows. Augustine's world ends the same year he does.

PART 2 — "TOLLE LEGE" (AD 386)

The most famous conversion scene in Christian literature is in Book 8 of Augustine's *Confessions*. He had been wrestling for months with what we would now call *akrasia* — the weakness of the will. He saw Christian truth, he wanted Christian truth, he could not bring himself to give up the sexual life of a well-appointed Roman professor.

> *"Give me chastity and self-control — but not yet."*
>
> **— Augustine, *Confessions* 8.7.17, recalling his own earlier prayer**

In August 386 he was sitting in a garden at a friend's house in Milan, weeping under a fig tree over his divided will, when he heard a child's voice from a neighbouring house repeatedly singing — he could not tell whether a boy's or a girl's — *tolle lege, tolle lege*: *"take up and read, take up and read."* He took it as a divine command. He walked back to his friend Alypius, picked up the book of Paul's letters lying open there, and read the first passage his eye fell on:

> *Greek NT (Rom 13:13–14): ὡς ἐν ἡμέρᾳ εὐσχημόνως περιπατήσωμεν, μὴ κώμοις καὶ μέθαις... ἀλλ' ἐνδύσασθε τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, καὶ τῆς σαρκὸς πρόνοιαν μὴ ποιεῖσθε εἰς ἐπιθυμίας.*
>
> Romans 13:13–14 (ESV): "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness... but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

Augustine says he did not want to read further; he did not need to. "Instantly, as the sentence ended, a light of serenity flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished away." (*Confessions* 8.12.29) He converted the same moment. Alypius, reading on, converted in the same reading. They walked inside to tell Monica, who had never stopped praying and now did not know how to stop rejoicing.

PART 3 — THE *CONFESSIONS* (C. AD 397–400)

Ten years after his conversion, as bishop of Hippo, Augustine wrote a book that did not exist as a genre before him. Before the *Confessions*, autobiographies were rhetorical set-pieces: Caesar's

Gallic War, the apologies of statesmen. Augustine wrote something else entirely — an inward, prayerful, painfully honest account of a soul.

The *Confessions* are thirteen books. Books 1–9 narrate his life from infancy to his mother's death at Ostia. Book 10 is a meditation on memory. Book 11 is a meditation on time (still cited in philosophical discussions today). Books 12–13 are an extended exegesis of Genesis 1.

The whole is written as a prayer. Augustine is not telling you about himself; he is telling *God* about himself, in God's hearing, letting you overhear.

> *"Great are you, O Lord, and greatly to be praised… You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."*
>
> **— Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1**

> *"Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you. Behold, you were within me, and I was outside; and there I sought you… You were with me, and I was not with you."*
>
> **— Augustine, *Confessions* 10.27.38**

What the *Confessions* did. Augustine invented the interior life as a subject of Christian writing. Every spiritual autobiography that came after him — Teresa of Ávila's *Life*, Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, Edwards' *Personal Narrative*, Lewis' *Surprised by Joy* — stands in his shadow. More profoundly, he made introspection a Christian discipline. The question "what is happening inside me?" became, for the West, a spiritual question rather than a merely philosophical one. His answer was always the same: whatever is happening inside you, **God is more inside you than you are** (*interior intimo meo*, *Confessions* 3.6.11).

PART 4 — THE DONATIST CONTROVERSY (C. 395–411)

When Augustine became bishop, most of North Africa's Christians were not in his communion. They belonged to a rigorist schism called **Donatism**, which had split from the Catholic church a hundred years earlier over how to receive back bishops and clergy who had handed over the Scriptures during Diocletian's persecution (the *traditores*, "handers-over"). Donatists insisted

that sacraments administered by a *traditor* or his successor were invalid. They re-baptized converts from the Catholic side. They insisted the church must be pure — without spot or wrinkle, now, visibly — or it was not the church at all.

Augustine argued back across twenty years of sermons, debates, letters, and finally the **Conference of Carthage** in June 411, at which imperial officials forced the two sides into a formal public debate and ruled for the Catholic side. His positions shaped Western ecclesiology permanently:

> • **The church is a *corpus permixtum*** — a “mixed body” of wheat and tares until the final judgement (Matt 13). To insist on a pure church now is to anticipate the eschaton and in the process to make every Christian congregation impossible.

> • **Sacraments are valid *ex opere operato*** — “from the work done,” because the minister is Christ. Baptism given in the triune name by an unworthy priest remains real baptism, because the baptizer is finally Christ working through him. This is the decisive argument that later enabled the Catholic-Protestant recognition of each other’s baptisms.

> • **Unity outranks purity.** Cutting yourself off from the worldwide Catholic church to preserve local purity is a worse sin than staying within it with imperfections.

> **The uncomfortable part.** Late in the controversy, Augustine reluctantly supported imperial *coercion* against the Donatists (*cogite intrare*, “compel them to come in,” from Luke 14:23). He thought coercion could produce a change of heart where argument had failed. This became, tragically, a foundation for a thousand years of Christian persecution of dissenters. Augustine himself came to have regrets about this position. Modern Augustinians, Protestant and Catholic, almost unanimously think he was wrong here.

PART 5 — THE PELAGIAN CONTROVERSY (C. 412–430)

Pelagius (c. AD 354–418)

BRITISH MONK • ASCETIC MORAL REFORMER • CONDEMNED AT CARTHAGE 418 AND EPHESUS 431

Ascetic reformer | Free will

Pelagius was a lay British monk — a genuinely holy man, known for his strict asceticism — who came to Rome and was scandalized by the low moral tone of Roman Christianity. His diagnosis was that Roman Christians had convinced themselves they could not help sinning, and so they did not try.

The story goes that Pelagius was listening to someone read aloud from Augustine's *Confessions*. When he heard Augustine pray — *"Grant what you command, and command what you will"* (*Conf.* 10.29.40) — Pelagius exploded. If God has to grant what he commands, the whole moral law is a sham.

Pelagius' teaching, roughly:

- Human nature was created good and remains *intact*. Adam's sin harmed Adam; it did not biologically corrupt his descendants.
- Every human being has the full capacity to obey God by free will. If obedience were impossible, God would not have commanded it.
- Grace is real — but grace is essentially the *help of teaching and example*: the Law, the prophets, Christ's own example. Grace does not change the will; it informs it.
- We can, in principle, live without sin. That some do not is a matter of choice.

Augustine's response is spread across a library of anti-Pelagian treatises (*On Nature and Grace* 415, *On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin* 418, *On the Predestination of the Saints* 429, *On the Gift of Perseverance* 429, among others). His core counter-claims:

> • **Original sin is real and inherited.** Adam's fall corrupted human nature; every child is born with a disordered will that chooses lesser goods over God. Augustine read Romans 5:12 — in the Latin Vulgate's *in quo omnes peccaverunt*, "in whom all sinned" —

> as teaching that we all actually participated in Adam's sin. (Modern readers will note this depends on a Latin translation; the Greek *eph' hôi* is better read "because all sinned." For the careful exegetical debate, see **our separate study on the doctrine of Original Sin**.)

> • **The will is really free — and really bound.** Augustine's paradox: we have free choice (*liberum arbitrium*), but after the fall our choice is bound to choose sin unless grace frees us. Freedom is not a pre-existing capacity we bring to the encounter with grace; freedom is grace's gift.

> • **Grace is prior, preventing, effectual.** Grace (*gratia*) does not merely help an otherwise-capable will. It precedes our willing (*gratia praeveniens*), it works in us to will (*gratia operans*), and it continues with us to work (*gratia cooperans*). We can do nothing good, not even turn to God in faith, apart from grace.

> *Greek NT (1 Cor 4:7): τίς γάρ σε διακρίνει; τί δε ̀ ἔχεις ὃ οὐκ ἔλαβες; εἰ δε ̀ και ̀ ἔλαβες, τί καυχᾶσαι ὡς μη ̀ λαβών;*
>
> 1 Corinthians 4:7 (ESV): "For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"

Augustine thought Paul's rhetorical question — *what do you have that you did not receive?* — was the decisive Pelagian-killer. He quoted it against Pelagius constantly.

> • **Predestination.** If grace is wholly God's gift and we cannot even will to receive it apart from that grace, then the ultimate reason some receive and others do not is located in God's own elective will. Augustine taught an *unconditional election* of some to final salvation, grounded solely in God's mercy and inscrutable to us. The *reprobate* are left in the mass of condemnation (*massa damnata*) their own sin has produced. This was the most difficult of Augustine's teachings in his own day; it remained difficult ever after.

The verdict of the church. Pelagius was condemned at a Council of Carthage in 418, and again more sharply at the Council of Ephesus in 431. A softened form of Pelagian thinking — called by historians *Semi-Pelagianism*, associated with John Cassian — survived for another

century in the southern French monasteries, until it too was condemned at the Second Council of Orange in 529. Orange formally received Augustine's doctrine of prevenient grace while leaving his doctrine of double predestination quietly aside. That is roughly the settlement the medieval church lived with: **Augustine on grace, not quite Augustine on predestination**.

The Reformers in the 16th century would reopen the second question and claim the fully Augustinian answer.

PART 6 — THE *CITY OF GOD* (AD 413–426)

On 24 August 410, Alaric the Visigoth and his army entered the gates of Rome. For the first time in eight hundred years, the eternal city had fallen. Pagan intellectuals — Rutilius Namatianus, Symmachus, others — had an explanation: the city had lost its gods. Ever since Constantine forced her to adopt Christianity, Rome had been stripped of the divine protection under which she had conquered the world. Refugees streaming into Africa were repeating the charge.

Augustine, now sixty, began to answer. What he wrote took thirteen years (413–426) and twenty-two books, and it is the most sustained theological engagement with politics and history any Christian author has produced.

The argument in outline:

> • **Books 1–10 tear apart the pagan charge.** Rome had fallen many times before Christianity; Rome's gods had never saved her; Rome's actual history was a long catalogue of moral disasters; the Christian god was, if anything, what had kept the recent sack unusually merciful (no massacres, churches respected as sanctuaries).

> • **Books 11–22 construct the positive argument.** Two *cities* are woven through all of history — the *civitas terrena*, the earthly city, and the *civitas Dei*, the City of God.

> *"Two loves have formed two cities: the earthly, by love of self to the point of contempt of God; and the heavenly, by love of God to the point of contempt of self. The first glories*

> *in itself; the second in the Lord."*
>
> **— Augustine, *City of God* 14.28**

The two cities are not the church and the state. They are intermingled in every nation, every church, every household, every heart. Every human being is a citizen of one or the other according to what they love most. The question is never "which city is Rome?" but "which city am I?"

The *City of God* also contains Augustine's cautious but decisive contribution to **just war theory** (Books 19–22) — four criteria for when a Christian may fight: legitimate authority, just cause, right intention, and the goal of peace. Every later Christian just-war tradition derives from this material.

PART 7 — *ON THE TRINITY* (AD 400–420)

Augustine's fifteen-book *De Trinitate* is the most influential Western meditation on the doctrine of God. Books 1–7 work through the biblical data and the Nicene settlement. Books 8–15 propose what became known as the **psychological analogy**: the Trinity leaves a faint trace in the human mind made in God's image.

The analogy in its mature form: the mind **remembers** itself, **understands** itself, **loves** itself — and memory, understanding, and love are three distinct operations, yet they are all the same mind. In the same way, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three distinct *persons* but one *essence*.

> *"These three are one, in that they are one life, one mind, one essence."*
>
> **— Augustine, *On the Trinity* 10.11.18**

Alongside the analogy, Augustine's *On the Trinity* tilted Latin Trinitarian theology in a direction different from the Greek East. Where the Cappadocians had started from the three persons and reasoned toward the shared essence, Augustine started from the one essence and reasoned toward the three persons. This subtle difference in theological instinct (*psychological*

vs social Trinity, in later categories) would eventually help produce the *filioque* dispute we covered in **Lesson 2 Part 2**.

PART 8 — FOUR MORE LEGACIES

ON CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE (396–426)

Augustine's manual of biblical hermeneutics. Books 1–3 lay out a theory of *signs* and *things* and a rule of interpretation: whatever reading does not build up the twin love of God and neighbour has not yet understood the text (*Doctr. Christ.* 1.36). Book 4 is a primer on Christian rhetoric. Luther and Calvin both read it carefully.

TIME & ETERNITY (*CONF.* BOOK 11)

What is time? Augustine's meditation — "If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain to one that asks, I know not" — is still taught in philosophy departments. He argues that time is a *distentio animi*, a stretching of the mind, and that God stands outside time in an eternal present.

JUST WAR THEORY

From *City of God* 19, Augustine's four criteria (legitimate authority, just cause, right intention, peace as goal) became the framework Aquinas, Grotius, and modern international-law theorists all extended. He is the father of Christian just-war thinking even when he is being misapplied by it.

TWO KINDS OF LOVE (*UTI / FRUI*)

Augustine distinguished between loving something *for its own sake* (*frui*, "enjoyment") and loving something *for the sake of something else* (*uti*, "use"). Only God is to be enjoyed for his own sake. Every other thing is rightly loved only when loved for God's sake. The framework undergirds every later Christian theology of created goods.

PART 9 — AUGUSTINE'S LONG SHADOW

Every major movement in Western theology has claimed Augustine. Five moments show how long the shadow is:

> • **Medieval theology.** Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) reworked Augustine's argument for God's existence. Aquinas (d. 1274) quoted Augustine more than any other church father in the *Summa*. Bonaventure's spirituality is essentially Augustinian.

> • **The Reformation.** Luther was an Augustinian friar before he was a Protestant. His doctrine of justification was a fierce extension of Augustine's anti-Pelagianism. Calvin called himself simply a reader of Augustine. The Protestant doctrine of *sola gratia* is the Augustinian doctrine with the volume turned up.

> • **The Counter-Reformation.** The Jesuit *Molinists* and the Dominican *Thomists* argued through the 16th and 17th centuries about *how* Augustine's doctrine of grace works — but neither side doubted that Augustine was right.

> • **Modern philosophy.** Descartes' *cogito* ("I think, therefore I am") is a restatement of Augustine's *si enim fallor, sum* ("if I am deceived, I am," *City of God* 11.26). Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* opens by quoting and critiquing Augustine's theory of language.

> • **Evangelical Christianity.** The Evangelical emphasis on inward experience of conversion, the testimony as a literary genre, the awareness that grace is God's unilateral gift to rebels — all of this is Augustinianism, even where it has forgotten its own roots.

Noll's point, spread across several chapters of *Turning Points*: when Augustine dies in 430, Western Christianity effectively has its operating system. Every subsequent turning point — Benedict, Charlemagne, Worms, Wesley — runs on Augustinian software.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

• **Our hearts are restless.** Augustine's first sentence remains his most enduring pastoral insight. Whatever else is true of the people in our pews, their hearts are looking for God whether they know it or not. Every counterfeit rest is a displaced search for the real one.

• **Grace really is grace.** The most important thing an Augustinian reading of Scripture does for the Christian life is to put beyond challenge the sheer *unearnedness* of our salvation. "What do you have that you did not receive?" is the question that kills every last trace of spiritual pride.

• **Conversion is a real event but a lifelong one.** Augustine was converted in a garden in 386; he was *being converted* for the next forty-four years. Sudden and gradual are not rivals.

• **Christians live in two cities.** We pray for our earthly city, work in it, pay its taxes, defend it when it is right, criticize it when it is wrong — but we are not finally *of* it. We live for a city whose builder and maker is God. Whenever a Christian tradition forgets that double citizenship, it starts either turning the church into a political party or withdrawing into irrelevance. Augustine kept both temptations at bay.

Greek NT (Eph 2:8–9): τῆ γα ̀ρ χάριτί ἐστε σεσῳσμένοι δια ̀ πίστεως· και ̀ τοῦτο οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν, θεοῦ το ̀ δῶρον· οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων, ἵνα μή τις καυχήσηται.

Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV): "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Augustine said his heart was restless until it rested in God. Where in your life is the restlessness most visible right now? Where have you recently mistaken some other rest for the real one?

2. Monica prayed for Augustine for forty-three years before he converted. Whom have you been praying for longer than you think you should have to?

3. Pelagius was a genuinely holy man who drew a reasonable-sounding conclusion: “if God commands it, we can do it.” What is wrong with his reasoning, and what is right about his concern for the moral seriousness of Christian life?

4. Augustine’s *corpus permixtum* ruled that the church is always a mixed body of saints and sinners until the Last Day. How does that shape how we respond to scandal in the church today?

5. The “two cities” pattern is a tool for measuring Christian political engagement. Is our congregation currently tempted more toward treating America as the City of God (a temptation of the right) or treating the City of God as irrelevant to politics (a temptation of the left)?

6. Augustine supported imperial coercion of the Donatists and came to regret some of that. What does it mean to love a theologian whose positions you think are sometimes wrong?

CLOSING PRAYER

> Father, we thank you for Augustine — for his restless youth and his late love, for Monica's tears and the voice in the garden, for *Confessions* and *City of God* and the library he left us. Thank you for the doctrine of grace that he defended at Carthage and that your Spirit keeps reminding your people of in every century. We confess that we are often tempted to Pelagius' confidence and Donatus' purity; spare us both. Teach us to pray, as Augustine did, "Grant what you command, and command what you will." Make our hearts restless until they rest in you. Then, Lord, give us rest. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources (all public domain; multiple modern translations):

- Augustine, *Confessions* (c. 397–400) — Henry Chadwick's OUP translation (1991) is the best English version for general readers.
- Augustine, *The City of God* (413–426) — Henry Bettenson's Penguin translation is readable; Boniface Ramsey's New City Press edition is the current scholarly standard.
- Augustine, *On the Trinity* (*De Trinitate*, c. 400–420).
- Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (*De Doctrina Christiana*).
- Anti-Pelagian works: *On Nature and Grace*, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, *On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin*, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, *On the Gift of Perseverance*.
- Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love* — a short late summary of his theology.
- Possidius of Calama, *Life of Augustine* (c. 437) — the earliest biography, by a friend.

Modern studies:

- Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (2nd ed., 2000) — the definitive modern biography.
- Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points* (3rd ed., 2012) — Augustine threads through chs. 3–6.
- James K. A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine* (2019) — a warm, contemporary reading.
- Matthew Levering, *The Theology of Augustine* (2013).
- Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology* (2006).
- Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustine* (ET 2002) — a North African historian's angle.

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