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SAINT AUGUSTINE

Confessions

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
HENRY CHADWICK

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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,¹⁹ 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.'²⁰ '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 house²¹ 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

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

²⁰ *Peristis*, *Sermo* 5: 66.

²¹ The oldest manuscript reads here 'from the house of God'. The candel'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).²² 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

²² *Adamantius, 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.²⁵ 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.

²⁵ See above, III. vi (19–22).

BOOK IX

Cassiciacum: to Monica's death

i (1) 'O Lord, I am your servant, I am your servant and the son of your handmaid. You have snapped my chains. I will sacrifice to you the offering of praise' (Ps. 115: 16–17). Let my heart praise you and my tongue, and 'let all my bones say, Lord who is like you?' (Ps. 34: 10). Let them speak, answer me, and say to my soul 'I am your salvation' (Ps. 34: 3).

Who am I and what am I? What was not evil in my deeds or, if not deeds, in my words or, if not words, in my intention? But you, Lord, 'are good and merciful' (Ps. 102: 8). Your right hand had regard to the depth of my dead condition, and from the bottom of my heart had drawn out a trough of corruption. The nub of the problem was to reject my own will and to desire yours. But where through so many years was my freedom of will? From what deep and hidden recess was it called out in a moment? Thereby I submitted my neck to your easy yoke and my shoulders to your light burden (Matt. 11: 30). O Christ Jesus 'my helper and redeemer' (Ps. 18: 15). Suddenly it had become sweet to me to be without the sweets of folly. What I once feared to lose was now a delight to dismiss. You turned them out and entered to take their place, pleasanter than any pleasure but not to flesh and blood, brighter than all light yet more inward than any secret recess, higher than any honour but not to those who think themselves sublime. Already my mind was free of 'the biting carcs'¹ of place-seeking, of desire for gain, of wallowing in self-indulgence, of scratching the itch of lust. And I was now talking with you, Lord my God, my radiance, my wealth, and my salvation.

ii (2) I made a decision 'in your sight' (Ps. 18: 15) not to break off teaching with an abrupt renunciation, but quietly to retire from my post as a salesman of words in the markets of rhetoric. I did not wish my pupils, who were giving their minds not to your law (Ps. 118: 70) nor to your peace, but to frenzied lies and lawcourt squabbles, to

¹ Horace, *Oda* 1, 18, 4.