
A CLOUD OF WITNESSES: AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354-430)

TIMELINE OF HIS LIFE:

- November 13, 354—Augustine born in Thagaste (modern day Souk Arhas, Algeria). He is engaged in studies until he needs to take a year off while his parents save money for better schooling (he is sixteen years old).
- 370—Augustine’s father (Patricius) is converted.
- 371—Patricius dies. [1]
- 371-374—Augustine studies at Carthage.
- 372—Augustine’s son (Adeodatus) is born.
- 373—Augustine reads Cicero’s *Hortensius* and his love for truth is born. He begins teaching rhetoric at Carthage.
- 383—Augustine moves to Rome to teach, hopeful of great things in the great city.
- 384—Augustine moves to Milan, disillusioned with Rome after bad behaviour of students. In Milan Augustine came under the ministry of Ambrose and became intellectually convinced of Christianity. His heart was still captured by sin. [2]
- 385—Augustine’s concubine is sent home in hopes of a ‘Christian’ marriage being arranged.
- 386—Augustine is converted in August. [3]
- 387—Augustine is baptized along with his friends in the Spring; his mother, Monica, dies in the fall. [4]
- 388—Begins his monastic life as a Christian at age 34. [5]
- 389—Adeodatus (his son) dies.
- 391—Augustine visits Hippo and becomes preaching elder at the church in Hippo. He is willing to stay only because they already have a bishop and because he has been promised a new monastery.
- 396—Augustine is appointed assistant Bishop. In less than a year Valerius (the Bishop of Hippo) dies, leaving Augustine the sole responsibility for the church in Hippo.
- 397-398—Augustine writes *The Confessions*. [6]
- 397-426—Augustine writes *On Christian Doctrine*.
- 400-416—Augustine writes *On the Trinity*. [7]
- August 26, 410—Rome is sacked by Gothic army (led by Alaric); it would be another 66 years before the Germans would depose the last Emperor.
- 413-426—Augustine writes *City of God*.
- 426-428—Augustine writes *Retractions*.
- August 28, 430—Augustine dies with 80,000 Vandals about to storm the city of Hippo, which was currently under siege. 1580 years later over 350 of his sermons still exist, along with over 5 million words of writing in commentaries, books, letters, and other writings.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM AUGUSTINE?

1. Learn what matters in parenting.

He would always speak of his father with a certain coldness. He said his father’s “*only concern was that I should learn how to make a good speech and learn how to persuade others by my words.*” Though others thought his father a good one, Augustine thought otherwise: “*Many of our townsmen, far richer than my father, went to no such trouble for their children’s sake [to send them to the best schools]. Yet this same father of mine took no trouble at all to see how I was growing in your sight [O God] or whether I was chaste or not. He cared only that I should have a fertile tongue, leaving my heart to bear none of your fruits, my God.*” This is a clear contrast from the depiction he gives of his mother, who constantly prayed for him and spoke to him of Jesus.

2. Learn from his ‘God-entranced’ worldview.

Of his mother’s prayers for him to stay in Carthage (not go to Italy) so that he would be saved: “*During the night, secretly, I sailed away, leaving her alone to her tears and her prayers. And what did she beg of you, my God, with all those tears, if not that you would prevent me from sailing? But you did not do as she asked you then. Instead, in the depth of your wisdom, you granted the wish that was closest to her heart. You did with me what she had always asked you to do.*”

“In Milan I found your devoted servant the bishop Ambrose... At that time his gifted tongue never tired of dispensing the richness of your corn, the joy of your oil, and the sober intoxication of your wine. Unknown to me, it was you who led me to him, so that I might knowingly be led by him to you.”

3. Learn from to see God as our ‘sovereign joy.’

Of his coming to an intellectual understanding of the gospel, but his powerlessness to change or believe it: *“I was astonished that although I now loved you ... I did not persist in enjoyment of my God. Your beauty drew me to you, but soon I was dragged away from you by my own weight and in dismay I plunged again into the things of this world ... as though I had sensed the fragrance of the fare but was not yet able to eat it. ... I was still held firm in the bonds of woman's love. ... I began to search for a means of gaining the strength I needed to enjoy you, [notice the battlefield: How shall I find strength to enjoy God more than sex?], but I could not find this means until I embraced the mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ.”*

Now reflecting on his conversion: *“But during all those years, where was my free will? What was the hidden, secret place from which it was summoned in a moment, so that I might bend my neck to your easy yoke and take your light burden on my shoulders, Christ Jesus, my Helper and Redeemer? How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose and was now glad to reject! You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure, though not to flesh and blood, you who outshine all light yet are hidden deeper than any secret in our hearts, you who surpass all honour though not in the eyes of men who see all honour in themselves.”*

4. Learn about communion with others as a means of grace and a means of delight.

In the throes of agony leading up to conversion: *“I now found myself driven by the tumult in my breast to take refuge in this garden, where no one could interrupt that fierce struggle, in which I was my own contestant, until it came to its conclusion. What the conclusion was to be you knew, O Lord, but I did not. Meanwhile I was beside myself with madness that would bring me sanity. I was dying a death that would bring me life. I knew the evil that was in me, but the good that was to be born in me I did not know. So I went out into the garden and Alypius followed me at my heels. His presence was no intrusion on my solitude, and how could he leave me in that frantic state?”*

5. Learn that God can mightily use those saved later in life.

Augustine was saved just before his 32nd birthday. *Christian History* magazine says, “After Jesus and Paul, Augustine of Hippo is the most influential figure in the history of Christianity.”

6. Learn to glory in confession.

“I must now carry my thoughts back to the abominable things I did in those days, the sins of the flesh which defiled my soul. I do this, my God, not because I love those sins, but so that I may love you. For love of your love I shall retrace my wicked ways. The memory is bitter, but it will help me to savour your sweetness, the sweetness that does not deceive but brings real joy and never fails. For love of your love I shall retrieve myself from the havoc of disruption which tore me to pieces when I turned away from you....”

7. Learn from his love of doctrine as love of God.

In a book he was working on when he died he listed over 80 heresies he had fought against: *“It is indeed true that the refutation of heretics gives greater prominence to the tenets of your Church [O Lord] and the principles of sound doctrine. For parties there must needs be, so that those who are true metal may be distinguished from the rest.”*

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT AUGUSTINE?

- *The Confessions* by Saint Augustine (Trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin). Published by Harmondsworth, 1961. ISBN: 014044114X.
- *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* by John Piper. Published by Crossway, 2000. ISBN: 1581341733.
- *Saint Augustine: A Life* by Garry Wills. Published by Penguin Books, 1999. ISBN: 0143035983.