

*The Confessions by Saint Augustine*

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[Page numbers provided here correspond roughly to the hardback edition]

**BOOK IX: *Death and Rebirth***

Page 209

1, 1. O Lord, I am your servant, I am your servant and your handmaid's son. You burst my bonds asunder, and to you will I offer a sacrifice of praise.†1 May my heart and tongue give praise to you, and all my bones cry out their question, "Who is like you, O Lord?"†2 Yes, let them ask, and then do you respond and say to my soul, "I am your salvation."†3

But who am I, what am I? Is there any evil I have not committed in my deeds, or if not in deeds, then in my words, or if not in words, at least by willing it? But you, Lord, are good and merciful,†4 and your right hand plumbed the depths of my death, draining the cesspit of corruption in my heart, so that I ceased to will all that I had been wont to will, and now willed what you willed.†5 But where had my power of free decision been throughout those long, weary years, and from what depth, what hidden profundity, was it called forth in a moment, enabling me to bow my neck to your benign yoke and my shoulders to your light burden,†6 O Christ Jesus, my helper and redeemer?†7 How sweet did it suddenly seem to me to shrug off those sweet frivolities, and how glad I now was to get rid of them—I who had been loath to let them go! For it was you who cast them out from me, you, our real and all-surpassing sweetness. You cast them out and entered yourself to take their place, you who are lovelier than any pleasure, though not to flesh and blood, more lustrous than any light, yet more inward than is any secret intimacy, loftier than all honor, yet not to those who look for loftiness in themselves.†8 My mind was free at last from the gnawing need to seek advancement and riches, to welter in filth and scratch my itching lust. Childlike, I chattered away to you, my glory, my wealth, my salvation, and my Lord and God.

*Augustine decides to renounce his career*

Page 210

2, 2. I believed it to be pleasing in your sight that I should withdraw the service of my tongue from the market of speechifying, so that young boys who were devoting their thoughts not to your law,†9 not to your peace, but to lying follies and legal battles, should no longer buy from my mouth the weapons for their frenzy; but I thought it better to retire unobtrusively rather than make an abrupt and sensational break. Fortunately there were now only a few days left before the vintage holidays,†10 and I decided to put up with this delay. I would then resign in the regular way, but return no more to offer myself for sale, now that you had redeemed me.

Our plan was therefore kept between ourselves and you, and not made known to other people outside our own company. We had agreed that it should not be divulged to all and sundry, even though as we climbed up from the valley of weeping†11 singing our pilgrim-song,†12 you had armed us with sharp arrows and burning coals†13 with which to fight the guileful tongues of any who opposed our project while pretending to promote it, and devoured us as they might food on pretense of liking.

3. With the arrows of your charity you had pierced our hearts,†14 and we bore your words within us like a sword penetrating us to the core. The examples of your servants, whom you had changed from murky to luminous beings, from dead to living men, were crowding in upon our thoughts, where they burned and consumed the heavy torpor that might have pulled us down again. So powerfully did they ignite us that every breath of guileful opposition blew our flame into fiercer heat, rather than extinguishing us.

Page 211

We could be certain, however, that there would be some who would admire the course we had resolved to follow, since you had spread the knowledge of your holy name throughout the world.†15 It therefore seemed like boastfulness to refuse to wait for a holiday period so close at hand, and instead to quit a professional post where I was in the public eye in such a fashion that, as everyone's attention was drawn to what I was doing, and they noted how little time was left before the first day of the holidays, which I had nevertheless chosen to forestall, they might have plenty to say about it, concluding that I merely wished to look important. And what was the point of arousing conjecture and contention over my state of mind, and letting this good thing that had come our way provide an occasion for slanderous gossip?†16

4. It happened by coincidence that in that same summer my lungs had begun to fail under the severe strain of teaching, making it difficult for me to draw breath and giving proof of their unhealthy condition by pains in my chest. My tone was husky and I could not manage any sustained vocal effort. These symptoms had worried me when they first appeared, because they were forcing upon me the necessity of either giving up my professorial career or, if there was any prospect of my being cured and recovering my strength, at least of taking some rest. But now that a wholehearted desire to be still and see that you are the Lord†17 had arisen within me and grown strong, as you know, my God, I began even to rejoice that a genuine excuse lay to hand which I could use to appease those parents who for their children's sake were unwilling ever to allow me freedom.†18 Full of this joy I endured the interval of time until it had run its course—it lasted perhaps twenty days or so—yet this took fortitude, because the desire for gain that had customarily helped me to sustain the heavy burden of work had now left me, and had not patience taken its place I should have been crushed by the load.

Page 212

It may be that someone among your servants, my brethren in the faith, will judge that I sinned in this matter by allowing myself to remain even for an hour in a professorial chair of lying†19 once my heart was fully intent on your service. I will not

argue. But have you not pardoned this sin, most merciful Lord, along with all the rest of my hideous, dismal sins, in the water of baptism, and forgiven me?

3, 5. Verecundus was racked with anxiety over this good thing that had befallen us, because he saw himself being distanced from our fellowship by the bonds that unbreakably held him. He was not yet a Christian, and though his wife was a believer, it was precisely she who trammelled him most rigidly and restrained him from the path on which we had set out; for he declared that he was unwilling to be a Christian in any way other than that from which he was debarred. In spite of this he kindly suggested that as long as we were there we should stay on his estate. At the resurrection of the just you will surely reward him, Lord, †20 since you have granted him already his allotted place among the just; †21 for later on, when we had gone to Rome, he was overtaken by an illness, in the course of which he became a believing Christian in our absence, and in that state departed this life. So it was that you showed mercy not only to him but to us as well, sparing us the unbearable grief of being forced to recall his outstanding kindness toward us while at the same time regarding him as an outsider to your flock. Thanks be to you, our God! We belong to you. You prove it by the exhortations and consolations you provide for us. Because you are faithful to your promises you are even now rewarding Verecundus for that country house of his at Cassiciacum, where we found rest in you from the hurly-burly of the world. †22 In exchange for his estate you now endow him with the delights of your verdant paradise for ever, since you pardoned him for his earthly sins by setting him on the mountain of rich pasture, your mountain, the mount of plenty. †23

Page 213

6. Verecundus was therefore full of anxiety at the time of which I speak, whereas Nebridius shared our joy. While not yet a Christian he, like us, had fallen into a pit of very dangerous error, †24 believing that the flesh of your Son, who is the Truth, was mere make-believe; but he was beginning to emerge from this error, and was in the position of one who, though not yet initiated into any of the rites of your Church, was a most ardent seeker of the truth.

But not very long after our conversion and rebirth in baptism, when he too was a believing Catholic, when he was serving you in perfect chastity and continence among his own people in Africa, when his whole household had become Christian through his example, you released him from the flesh. And now he lives in Abraham's bosom. †25 Whatever that may be, whatever the gospel word "bosom" may mean, there my Nebridius is living, to me a friend most tenderly loved, to you, Lord, a freedman adopted as your son; yes, there he lives on. Where else could such a soul be at home? He is alive in that place about which he used to ask me so many questions, ignorant and paltry fellow that I am. No longer does he bend his ear to my mouth; rather does he lay the mouth of his spirit to your fountain and avidly slake his thirst as he drinks your wisdom to the uttermost of his capacity, in happiness without end. Yet I cannot believe that he is so inebriated as to forget me, since you, Lord, from whom he drinks, are mindful of us.

Such, then, was our situation. On the one hand we sought to console Verecundus who, though saddened by our conversion, continued to be our friend, urging him to be faithful to his own calling, namely married life; on the other we waited for Nebridius to follow us. He was very close to doing so, indeed on the point of making his decision, when the days of waiting expired at last. Slow and tedious they had seemed, so sharp was my longing for leisured freedom in which to sing with every fibre of my being, *To you my heart tells its love: I have sought your face, O Lord, for your face will I seek.*<sup>†26</sup>

*To Cassiciacum with his mother, son, and friends*

Page 214

4, 7. At last the day arrived which was to set me free in fact from the profession of rhetor, as I was free already in spirit. And so it was done; you detached my tongue from that bond whence you had already delivered my heart, and I blessed you as I joyfully set out for the villa with all my company.<sup>†27</sup> The evidence of what I did there in the way of literary work is to be found in the books that record disputations held between those there present, and deliberations alone with myself in your sight; it was work unquestionably devoted by now to your service, but still with a whiff of scholastic pride about it, like combatants still panting in the interval.<sup>†28</sup> What I wrote to Nebridius, who was absent, my letters to him testify.<sup>†29</sup>

When could I ever find time enough to record all your generous favours to us during that period—especially now that I am hurrying on to greater matters still? My memory harks back to our sojourn there, and it is my delight, Lord, to acknowledge before you what inward goads you employed to tame me, how you laid low the mountains and hills of my proud intellect and made of me an even plain, how you straightened my winding ways and smoothed my rugged patches,<sup>†30</sup> and how you also brought my heart's brother, Alypius, to submit to the name of your only-begotten Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. At first he disdained to admit it into our writings, for he wanted them to give off the tang of those lofty cedars of Lebanon, felled though these now were by the Lord,<sup>†31</sup> rather than the scent of plants grown in your Church and efficacious against snakebite.

*He lives with the psalms*

8. How loudly I cried out to you, my God, as I read the psalms of David, songs full of faith, outbursts of devotion with no room in them for the breath of pride! Uncouth I was in real love for you, a catechumen on holiday in a country house with another catechumen, Alypius; but my mother kept us company, woman in outward form but endowed with virile faith, uniting the serenity of an elderly person with a mother's love and Christian devotion.

Page 215

How loudly I began to cry out to you in those psalms, how I was inflamed by them with love for you and fired to recite them to the whole world, were I able, as a remedy against human pride! Yet in truth they are sung throughout the world, and no one can hide from

your burning heat.†32 I felt bitterly angry with the Manichees, though my indignation was tinged with pity, because they knew nothing of this remedy and ranted against the very antidote which might have healed them. I could wish that they had been somewhere nearby, without my knowing it, and had gazed upon my face and listened to my voice as I read the fourth psalm in that place of peace. *When I called on him he heard me, the God of my vindication; when I was hard beset you led me into spacious freedom. Have mercy on me, Lord, and hearken to my prayer:†33* would that they had heard what these words of the psalm did to me, but heard without my knowledge, lest they think that it was for their benefit that I uttered words of my own, interspersed with yours! I would surely not have spoken, or not in the same vein, had I felt myself exposed to their ears and eyes; and even if I had, they would not have taken those words I uttered for what they were, the intimate expression of my mind, as I conversed with myself and addressed myself in your presence.

9. I shuddered with awe, yet all the while hope and joy surged up within me at your mercy, Father.†34 It all found an outlet through my eyes and voice when your good Spirit turned to us, saying, *How long will you be heavy-hearted, human creatures? Why love emptiness and chase falsehood?†35* I, certainly, had loved emptiness and chased falsehood, and you, Lord, had already glorified your Holy One,†36 raising him from the dead and setting him at your right hand, whence he could send the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth†37 from on high, as he had promised.†38 He had sent him already, but I did not know it. Yes, he had sent the Spirit, for already he had been glorified in his resurrection from the dead†39 and ascension to heaven. Before that time the Spirit was not given, because Jesus had not been glorified.†40 This is why the prophecy cries out, *How long will you be heavy-hearted? Why love emptiness and chase falsehood? Be sure of this: the Lord has glorified his Holy One.†41* It demands, *How long?* It cries, *Be sure of this;* yet for so long I had been anything but sure, and had loved emptiness and chased falsehood, and so I trembled as I heard these words, for they are addressed to the kind of person I remembered myself to have been. In the fables which I had taken for truth there was emptiness and falsehood; loud and strong I bewailed many an episode among my painful memories. Oh, that they could have heard me, those who still love emptiness and chase falsehood! They might perhaps be so shaken as to spew it out, and then you would hear them when they cried to you,†42 because he who for us died a true death in the flesh now intercedes with you on our behalf.

Page 216

10. Then I read, *Let your anger deter you from sin,†43* and how these words moved me, my God! I had already learned to feel for my past sins an anger with myself that would hold me back from sinning again. With good reason had I learned this anger, since it was no alien nature from a tribe of darkness that had been sinning through me, as they maintain who, though not angry with themselves, are accumulating a fund of anger that will overwhelm them on the day of anger, the day when your righteous judgment is to be revealed.†44

For me, good things were no longer outside, no longer quested for by fleshly eyes in this world's sunlight. Those who want to find their joy in externals all too easily grow

empty themselves. They pour themselves out on things which, being seen, are but transient,†45 and lick even the images of these things with their famished imagination. If only they would weary of their starvation and ask, *Who will show us good things?*†46 Let us answer them, and let them hear the truth: *The light of your countenance has set its seal upon us, O Lord.*†47 We are not ourselves that Light which illumines every human being,†48 but by you we are illumined, so that we who were once darkness may become light in you.†49 Ah, if only they could see the eternal reality within! I had tasted it,†50 and was frantic at my inability to show it to them; if only they would bring to me those hearts of theirs which lived in their outward-gazing eyes, outside and away from you; if only they would say, *Who will show us good things?* There within, where I had grown angry with myself, there in the inner chamber where I was pierced with sorrow,†51 where I had offered sacrifice, slaying my old nature†52 and hoping in you as I began to give my mind to the new life,†53 there you had begun to make me feel your sweetness and had given me *joy in my heart.*†54

Page 217

As I read these words outwardly and experienced their truth inwardly I shouted with joy, and lost my desire to dissipate myself amid a profusion of earthly goods, eating up time as I was myself eaten by it; for in your eternal simplicity I now had a different *wheat and wine and oil.*†55

11. The next verse wrung a cry from the very depths of my heart: *In peace!* Oh, *In Being itself!* What did it say? *I will rest and fall asleep.*†56 Yes, for who shall make war against us when that promise of scripture is fulfilled, *Death is swallowed up into victory?*†57 In truth you are Being itself, unchangeable, and in you is found the rest that is mindful no more of its labors, for there is no one else beside you, nor need our rest concern itself with striving for a host of other things that are not what you are; rather it is you, *you, Lord, who through hope establish me in unity.*†58

I read on and on, all afire, but I could find no way to help those deaf, dead folk among whom I had once been numbered. I had been a lethal nuisance, bitter and blind and baying against honey-sweet scriptures distilled from heaven's honey, scriptures luminous by your light;†59 but now to think of the enemies of that scripture†60 caused me anguish.

Page 218

12. How shall I ever remember all that happened during that holiday? But one thing I cannot forget and will not omit, a harsh chastisement you laid on me, which was followed with amazing swiftness by your mercy. At that time you tortured me with a toothache, and when it had grown so severe that I could not speak, the thought entered my heart that I should urge all my own people who were there to pray for me to you, the God of every kind of healing. I wrote this on a wax tablet and gave it to one of them to read out to the rest. The moment we knelt down and begged this favor from you, the pain vanished. What was that pain? Where did it go? I must admit that I was terrified, my Lord and my God,†61 for I had never in all my life experienced anything like it. It came home to me

most deeply that this was a sign of your powerful will, and I rejoiced in my faith as I praised your name;†62 yet this same faith did not allow me to be complacent about my past sins, which had not yet been forgiven me through baptism.

5, 13. When the holidays were over I announced my retirement. The citizens of Milan would have to provide another word-peddler for their students, because I had made up my mind to give myself to your service, and in any case I was unequal to that profession now that I had difficulty in breathing and pains in the chest. I wrote to the holy man Ambrose, your bishop, notifying him of my past errors and present intention, and asking his advice as to which of your books in particular I ought to read, the better to prepare myself for so great a grace and render me more fit to receive it. He recommended the prophet Isaiah, I think because he more plainly than all others foretold the gospel and the call of the Gentiles. The first part I read of this book was incomprehensible to me, however, and, assuming that all the rest would be the same, I put it off, meaning to take it up again later, when I was more proficient in the word of the Lord.

### *They return to Milan and are baptized*

Page 219

6, 14. The time arrived for me to give in my name for baptism, so we left the country and moved back to Milan.†63 Alypius had decided to join me in being reborn in you, and was already clothed with the humility†64 that befitted your mysteries. He was also extremely courageous in subduing his body, even to the point of walking barefoot on the icy soil of Italy, a thing few dared to do. We associated the boy Adeodatus with us as well, my son according to the flesh, born of my sin. Very fair had you fashioned him. He was then about fifteen, but surpassed many educated men of weighty learning. I am acknowledging that these were your gifts, O Lord my God, creator of all things,†65 who are more than powerful enough to give fair form to our deformities, for nothing did I contribute to that boy's making except my fault. It was you, and you alone, who had inspired us to instruct him in your truth as he grew up, and so it is your own gifts that I acknowledge to you. There is a book of ours entitled *The Teacher*, in which he converses with me. You know that all the thoughts there attributed to my interlocutor were truly his, although he was only about sixteen years old. Many other things even more wonderful did I observe in him. The brilliance he evinced filled me with awe, for who else but you could be the artificer of such prodigies? Very soon you took him away from this life on earth, but I remember him without anxiety, for I have no fear about anything in his boyhood or adolescence; indeed I fear nothing whatever for that man. We included him in the group as our contemporary in the life of your grace, to be schooled along with us in your doctrine.

And so we were baptized, and all our dread about our earlier lives dropped away from us.†66 During the days that followed†67 I could not get enough of the wonderful sweetness that filled me as I meditated upon your deep design for the salvation of the human race. How copiously I wept at your hymns and canticles, how intensely was I moved by the lovely harmonies of your singing Church! Those voices flooded my ears, and the truth was distilled into my heart until it overflowed in loving devotion; my tears ran down, and I was the better for them.

## Footnotes

- †1. See Ps 115(116):16-17; 85(86):15-16.
- †2. See Ps 34(35):10.
- †3. See Ps 34(35):3.
- †4. See Ex 34:6; Ps 85(86):15.
- †5. See Mt 26:39; Mk 14:36.
- †6. See Mt 11:30.
- †7. See Ps 18:15(19:14). Here, so soon after his mention of the crucial text, *Put on the Lord Jesus Christ*, Augustine addresses Christ by this name for the only time in *The Confessions*.
- †8. Probably a trinitarian allusion: Spirit-Word-Father; but also the antithesis of the three temptations of 1 Jn 2:16.
- †9. See Ps 118(119):70, 77.
- †10. 23 August to 15 October, a holiday period fixed for the imperial law-courts and probably the schools by Theodosius ( *Cod. Theod.* 2.8.19) to provide a respite from the summer heat and an opportunity for gathering autumn crops. This Book IX is Augustine's book of vintage and harvest in the spiritual world.
- †11. See Ps 83:7(84:6),
- †12. Pss 119-133(120-134) were traditionally associated with pilgrims going up to Jerusalem.
- †13. See Ps 119(120):3-4. In his *Exposition of the Psalms* 119, 5, Augustine explains that the sharp arrows are God's words and the burning coals salutary examples.
- †14. This imagery inspired the traditional icon for Augustine, a pierced and burning heart.
- †15. See Ez 36:23.
- †16. See Rom 14:16.
- †17. See Ps 45:11(46:10). Augustine evokes the ultimate "letting go," the Sabbath of rest with no evening, in the last chapter of *The City of God* (XXII, 30)
- †18. An untranslatable Augustinian pun on *liberi* (children) and *liber* (free).
- †19. See Ps 1:1.
- †20. See Lk 14:14.
- †21. See Ps 124(125):3.
- †22. Rest in God, Augustine's perpetual desire from I, 1, 1 to XIII, 38, 53, was achieved partially and temporarily at Cassiciacum, to which they retired after the end of the vintage holidays. Its exact location is disputed. Some Augustinian dialogues took shape during the following weeks.
- †23. See Ps 67:16(68:15), Old Latin. The first phrase literally "cheesy mountain"; in his *Expositions of the Psalms* 67, 22, Augustine explains that the mountain is Christ, milk represents grace, and cheese is made from milk. The similarity of sound (*incaseato*) may have reminded him of the name Cassiciacum.
- †24. See Ps 7:16(15).
- †25. See Lk 16:22.
- †26. Ps 26(27):8.
- †27. The party included Alypius, Monica, Augustine's brother Navigius, his son Adeodatus, two pupils (Licentius and Trygetius), and two cousins.
- †28. The three dialogues, *Answer to the Sceptics*, *The Happy Life*, and *Order*, and the two books of *Soliloquies* belong to this time.
- †29. Letters 3 and 4 were written from Cassiciacum.
- †30. See Is 40:4; Lk 3:4-5.
- †31. See Ps 28(29):5.
- †32. See Ps 18:7(19:6).
- †33. Ps 4:2(1).
- †34. See Ps 30:7-8(31:6-7).
- †35. Ps 4:3(2). Not only is this a harvest/vintage psalm, in tune with Augustine's mood in the present peaceful interlude; its structure also corresponds to the stages of his life so far, which explains its powerful appeal to him.
- †36. See Ps 4:4(3).
- †37. See Jn 14:16-17.
- †38. See Lk 24:49.
- †39. See Rom 6:9; 7:4; 1 Cor 15:20.
- †40. See Jn 7:39.



†41. Ps 4:3-4(2-3).

†42. See Ps 4:4(3).

†43. Ps 4:5(4).

†44. See Rom 2:5.

†45. See 2 Cor 4:18.

†46. Ps 4:6(5).

†47. *Ibid*

†48. See Jn 1:9.

†49. See Eph 5:8.

†50. See Ps 33:9(34:8).

†51. See Ps 4:5(4).

†52. See Eph 4:22; Col 3:9.

†53. See Col 3:10; 2 Cor 4:16.

†54. Ps 4:7.

†55. Ps 4:8(7).

†56. Ps 4:9(8). The word *idipsum* in the Latin of the psalm (“the selfsame”) is for Augustine a mysterious name for God, the infinite, immutable Being. It evokes for him the revelation of the divine name to Moses in Ex 3:14. Parallels within *The Confessions* are VII, 17, 23; IX, 10, 24; XII, 7, 7.

†57. 1 Cor 15:54.

†58. Ps 4:10(8). *Singulariter* could be an adverb applied to God’s action: “You alone establish...”; but Augustine takes it to be the antithesis of the dispersion, multiplicity, evoked at the end of the preceding paragraph.

†59. See Ps 118(119):103.105.

†60. See Ps 138(139):21.

†61. See Jn 20:28.

†62. See Ps 144(145):2; Sir 51:15.

†63. About six months have elapsed since the preceding chapter; they spent the winter of 386-387 at Cassiciacum. We have now reached the early days of Lent, around the beginning of March 387.

†64. See Col 3:12.

†65. See 2 Mc 1:24; Ambrose, Hymn 1.2, quoted more extensively at IX, 12, 32.

†66. They were baptized by immersion, confessing faith in the Trinity, at the Easter Vigil during the night 24-25 April 387. Augustine himself (at least) was baptized by Ambrose, as he later testified. A description of the whole ceremony as observed at that time has survived in two works by Ambrose, *On the Sacraments* and *On the Mysteries*. After baptism the white-clad neophytes were led from baptistery to church, where they were present at the full eucharist for the first time and received communion.

†67. That is, from Easter until the following Sunday. During this week the neophytes kept on the white garments received at baptism and attended daily liturgies at which fuller instruction about the faith and the sacraments was given to them. Many of the sermons later preached by Augustine as a bishop to the neophytes in Easter week have survived.