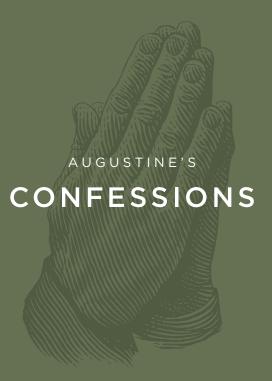
CHRISTIAN GUIDES
TO THE CLASSICS



LELAND RYKEN

# AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS

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# AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS

LELAND RYKEN



Augustine's "Confessions"

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#### The Nature and Function of Literature

We need to approach any piece of writing with the right expectations, based on the kind of writing that it is. The expectations that we should bring to any work of literature are the following:

**The subject of literature.** The subject of literature is human experience, rendered as concretely as possible. Literature should thus be contrasted to expository writing of the type we use to conduct the ordinary business of life. Literature does not aim to impart facts and information. It exists to make us share a series of experiences. Literature appeals to our image-making and image-perceiving capacity. A famous novelist said that his purpose was to make his readers *see*, by which he meant *to see life*.

**The universality of literature.** To take that one step farther, the subject of literature is *universal* human experience—what is true for all people at all times in all places. This does not contradict the fact that literature is first of all filled with concrete particulars. The particulars of literature are a net whereby the author captures and expresses the universal. History and the daily news tell us what *happened*; literature tells us what *happens*. The task that this imposes on us is to recognize and name the familiar experiences that we vicariously live as we read a work of literature. The truth that literature imparts is truthfulness to life—knowledge in the form of seeing things accurately. As readers we not only look *at* the world of the text but *through* it to everyday life.

An interpretation of life. In addition to portraying human experiences, authors give us their interpretation of those experiences. There is a persuasive aspect to literature, as authors attempt to get us to share their views of life. These interpretations of life can be phrased as ideas or themes. An important part of assimilating imaginative literature is thus determining and evaluating an author's angle of vision and belief system.

The importance of literary form. A further aspect of literature arises from the fact that authors are artists. They write in distinctly literary genres such as narrative and poetry. Additionally, literary authors want us to share their love of technique and beauty, all the way from skill with words to an ability to structure a work carefully and artistically.

**Summary.** A work of imaginative literature aims to make us see life accurately, to get us to think about important ideas, and to enjoy an artistic performance.

# Why the Classics Matter

This book belongs to a series of guides to the literary classics of Western literature. We live at a time when the concept of a literary classic is often misunderstood and when the classics themselves are often undervalued or even attacked. The very concept of a classic will rise in our estimation if we simply understand what it is.

What is a classic? To begin, the term *classic* implies the best in its class. The first hurdle that a classic needs to pass is excellence. Excellent according to whom? This brings us to a second part of our definition: classics have stood the test of time through the centuries. The human race itself determines what works rise to the status of classics. That needs to be qualified slightly: the classics are especially known and valued by people who have received a formal education, alerting us that the classics form an important part of the education that takes place within a culture.

This leads us to yet another aspect of classics: classics are known to us not only in themselves but also in terms of their interpretation and reinterpretation through the ages. We know a classic partly in terms of the attitudes and interpretations that have become attached to it through the centuries.

Why read the classics? The first good reason to read the classics is that they represent the best. The fact that they are difficult to read is a mark in their favor; within certain limits, of course, works of literature that demand a lot from us will always yield more than works that demand little of us. If we have a taste for what is excellent, we will automatically want some contact with classics. They offer more enjoyment, more understanding about human experience, and more richness of ideas and thought than lesser works (which we can also legitimately read). We finish reading or rereading a classic with a sense of having risen higher than we would otherwise have risen.

Additionally, to know the classics is to know the past, and with that knowledge comes a type of power and mastery. If we know the past, we are in some measure protected from the limitations that come when all we know is the contemporary. Finally, to know the classics is to be an educated person. Not to know them is, intellectually and culturally speaking, like walking around without an arm or leg.

**Summary.** Here are four definitions of a literary classic from literary experts; each one provides an angle on why the classics matter. (1) The best that has been thought and said (Matthew Arnold). (2) "A literary classic ranks with the best of its kind that have been produced" (*Harper Handbook to Literature*). (3) A classic "lays its images permanently on the mind [and] is entirely irreplaceable in the sense that no other book whatever comes anywhere near reminding you of it or being even a momentary substitute for it" (C. S. Lewis). (4) Classics are works to which "we return time and again in our minds, even if we do not reread them frequently, as touchstones by which we interpret the world around us" (Nina Baym).

## The Confessions: The Book at a Glance

Author. Augustine (354-430)

Nationality. Roman North African or Middle Eastern; Latin-speaking

**Date of composition and publication.** Composition began in 397 (when Augustine was in his midforties and a decade after his famous conversion) and continued for one to four more years (estimates vary); written in Latin; circulated in handwritten manuscripts until published in late fifteenth century

#### Approximate number of pages. 325

**Available editions.** Multiple well-known English translations, including those by Henry Chadwick (Oxford World's Classics); Maria Boulding (Vintage); R. S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin); Rex Warner (Mentor); Albert C. Outler (Dover Thrift Edition)

**Genres.** Autobiography; spiritual autobiography; memoir; confession; meditative writing; journal; prayer; narrative; Christian apologetics; conversion narrative; biography (of Augustine's mother and multiple acquaintances); dialogue or conversation (between Augustine and God)

**Setting.** International: North Africa (including Augustine's hometown of Thagaste in modern Algeria, and also Carthage), Rome, and Milan

**Main characters.** Augustine; his mother, Monica; his father, Patrick (Latin, Patricius); Augustine's unnamed mistress or concubine or common-law wife; Bishop Ambrose; Augustine's friends Alypius and Nebridius; his son, Adeodatus

**Summary of content.** The first eight books are loosely autobiographical, beginning with Augustine's infancy and ending with his conversion at the age of thirty-two. Book 9 covers events in the year following Augustine's conversion, being divided between further autobiographical material on Augustine and a biography of Monica (including her death). Book 10 is a prolonged analysis of the topics of memory, the human search for the happy life, and the sins that tempt people. Book 11 is similarly topical, dealing primarily with time. Books 12–13 are collections of meditations on many subjects, with the story of creation in Genesis 1 forming the general framework for those meditations.

**Unity.** The unity of the *Confessions* is problematical. The book does not possess a narrative unity, even though Books 1–9 tell the story of Augustine's life during his first thirty-three years (along with much additional nonnarrative material). Certain motifs form a template on which Augustine weaves a many-sided tapestry, and these unify the book, as follows: (1) the I-thou relationship that Augustine continually builds in his prayers addressed to God; (2) the quest to find God and spiritual repose; (3) the human impulse toward sin that continually thwarts Augustine's (and our) desire to be united to God; (4) the inner thoughts of Augustine are never absent for long, and the vehicles for the author's sharing of his thoughts are varied (including meditation, journal-type writing, exposition in essay fashion, and prayers addressed to God); (5) the Bible as a subtext or presence, usually in the form of direct quotations.

**Place in Augustine's life.** Augustine began writing his *Confessions* the year after he became Bishop of Hippo, perhaps partly to defend himself against detractors. He was one of the most prolific authors in Christian history, writing dozens of individual treatises. *Confessions* comes approximately a third of the way down the list chronologically. The book that rivals *Confessions* in fame and influence, *The City of God*, was composed over a thirteen-year span, starting some fifteen years after the beginning of the composition of the *Confessions*.

**Tips for reading.** (1) The common label of autobiography for this book is not inaccurate, but it sets up false expectations; this book is not a continuous narrative, and if we go to it expecting the usual narrative flow of an autobiography, we will be frustrated by what Augustine puts before us. (2) Reading the Confessions with enjoyment depends on learning how to negotiate the mixed-genre format of the book; Augustine mingles a host of genres (see "Genres" opposite and also "What Kind of Book Is the Confessions?" following) without smooth transitions between them, and this requires constant alertness on the part of readers. In turn, this challenge is one of the delights of reading the Confessions. (3) Literature combines the particular with the universal; as we read the Confessions, we are very aware of how autobiographical the details are, but Augustine includes various things (especially the interspersed prayers) to make the material applicable to the experiences of every reader. Even though the book is seventeen hundred years old, Augustine emerges from the pages as a thoroughly modern man.

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### The Author and His Faith

Augustine belongs to what today we call the early Christian church. Much to our surprise, the New Testament era did not flow seamlessly into the theological consensus that today we regard as the Christian faith. Instead it groped its way over several centuries toward an established theology and set of church practices. We catch glimpses of the theological uncertainty of the era in which Augustine lived as we progress through the *Confessions*.

"Mere Christianity" in Augustine. Much of the Christian element that we find in Augustine's massive religious writings is what any orthodox Christian believes. In this theological superstructure, God is the ultimate being. He is a triune God who consists in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God created people in his image and as perfect creatures, but they fell into sin by disobeying him. Fallen people are under God's condemnation unless they are saved by belief in the atonement of Christ. Christ is both divine and human and can therefore serve as the perfect mediator between people and the Father. People who have been thus redeemed order their lives by the guidelines that God provides in the Bible.

**Catholicism.** Beyond the general Christianity that Augustine espouses, much of his theology and beliefs about the church belong to Catholicism. We need to remember that for the first fifteen centuries of Christianity, Catholicism was synonymous with the Christian church. Catholicism as we find it in Augustine is closely tied to the institutional church; to be a Christian is to be affiliated with the visible church and practice its rituals. The leaders of the church are assumed to be priests and bishops, not ministers, elders, and deacons. The sacraments are believed to confer grace, so that baptism (for example) is not simply a sign but the very means by which sins are covered by the atonement of Jesus. Without baptism, one is not fully a Christian.

The influence of Augustine in the history of Christianity. It is impossible to overstate the importance of Augustine in Christian history. He ranks just behind the apostle Paul and alongside Martin Luther and John Calvin as influences, right to the present day. The best index to his towering stature is the regularity with which he is referred to in the writings and lectures of Christian scholars, as well as being the subject of a never-ending succession of books and articles.

# What Kind of Book Is the *Confessions*?

The *Confessions* is a difficult book, partly because of the format in which Augustine cast his material. The overriding format is what literary scholars call a mixed-genre, also known as encyclopedic form. (The New Testament Gospels follow the same format.) What this means is that no single genre governs the entire book. It is relatively easy to identify the individual genres that converge in the text, but their kaleidoscopic combination makes the book unique and demanding to read. Here are some of the specific genres that we need to keep on our radar screens when reading the *Confessions*:

- Narrative or story. Many individual units are cast into a narrative form and consist of events that unfold in sequence. Furthermore, despite the abundance of nonnarrative material, the entire collection of units tells the story of Augustine's life. More specifically, the *Confessions* tells three stories at the same time. Most obviously, the story of Augustine's life until his conversion is a story about running away from God. But at a deeper level it turns out that this flight from God was really a search to find God. Then, to add to the complexity, Augustine imposes yet another overlay on the previous two levels: running from God and searching for God were really God's pursuit of Augustine. This is known in Christian circles as "the hound of heaven" motif, based on a famous Victorian poem by Francis Thompson titled "The Hound of Heaven" (a work that makes good collateral reading with Augustine's *Confessions*, which was obviously in Thompson's mind as he wrote his poem). Augustine himself orchestrates his work in such a way that we can clearly see all three narrative threads if we look for them.
- **Prayer.** Interspersed prayers addressed by Augustine to God make a regular appearance in the *Confessions*. This is an unexpected and unique feature of the book, and the result is that it is impossible *not* to read the *Confessions* devotionally. The prayers also lend a universal quality to the book: the events that happened to Augustine are unique to him, but every reader can identify with his prayers addressed to God.
- **Dialogue or conversation.** As handled in Augustine's distinctive way, the continuous thread of prayer emerges as a dialogue between Augustine and God. The prayers often seem like part of a conversation instead of a one-person prayer, and the frequent quotations from the Bible likewise convey the impression that God speaks to Augustine as well as vice versa. We can note in passing that Augustine used the Old Latin text of the Bible; Jerome's Vulgate appeared too late to enter the *Confessions*, and additionally, Augustine was critical of it.
- Biblical allusions skillfully woven into the tapestry of the book. The Bible is a continuous presence in the *Confessions*, something that is

enhanced if we read it in an edition that signals the biblical references by enclosing them within quotation marks and providing the place in the Bible where each quotation appears. We can speak of the Bible as a subtext ("a text under the surface") in the *Confessions*. Additionally, the interplay between the ancient text and the use to which Augustine puts it is known to scholars as an intertext (with the important "text" being the one that lies *between* Augustine's text and the Bible). Scripture informs the entire book, and paradoxically, Augustine speaks most authentically about himself when he uses the words of the biblical authors.

- An autobiography? The *Confessions* is regularly called an autobiography, but we need to use the term carefully. First, the book does not provide a continuous chronological account of Augustine's life. Second, much of the material does not deal with Augustine's life at all. Third, an autobiography is ordinarily cast into a narrative form, and more than half of the *Confessions* is something other than narrative (e.g., journal writing, meditation or reflection, biographies of people such as Augustine's mother and his friend Alypius). To be precise, therefore, we should say that the *Confessions* is autobiographical without being an autobiography.
- **Memoir.** The genre of memoir is almost never applied to the *Confessions*, but it is actually a more helpful term than autobiography. A memoir is a collection of remembrances accompanied by analysis. It is much more selective and piecemeal than an autobiography—gleanings from a life, brought together and analyzed by the author later in life. The writer of a memoir makes no attempt to reconstruct an entire life. A memoir is how one remembers and understands one's life, while an autobiography is a documentary history that assembles the facts of a life. The *Confessions* is primarily a retrospective analysis and assessment of what was happening to the author at various points of his life. We can helpfully think of it as the history of the author's heart or soul.
- **Meditation or reflection.** It is hard to determine the proportions of various genres in the total picture, but at the end of the day it is possible that the main action of the *Confessions* is Augustine in the process of thinking things through. In any case, a main action is Augustine's mind in the process of thought. We need to keep this paradigm in mind and not be looking for a narrative of external events when it is not present.

#### A Classical as Well as Christian Text

The *Confessions* is a classical text rooted in ancient Greek and Roman culture. The book was written in Latin. The author received a Roman education. The books he read were authored by Greek and Roman authors. The North African point of origin is thus almost irrelevant; what matters is the overwhelming in-

fluence of Rome and its worldwide empire. The foreground element in the book is the Bible and Christianity, but in the background we can see the influence of classical ideas, especially Platonism, and allusions to classical books.

#### The Confessions as a Work of Literature

The *Confessions* is a crossover book that multiple disciplines claim. It is regularly taught in religion and theology courses, and most of the scholarly commentary on it is written by theologians. It also has a place as a primary text in the history of Christianity, or church history. Additionally, it is almost automatically made to fit the niche of autobiography.

This guide, however, belongs to a series devoted to literary classics, so the approach here is to view the *Confessions* as a work of literature. The ingredients that allow us to speak of the Confessions as a work of literature are the following: (1) The individual genres that make up the book (see discussion above) are mainly literary genres, lending a literary feel to the book. (2) If we stand back far enough from the mosaic of diverse genres, we can say that the book tells the story of Augustine's life and thinking, with the result that (as with the Bible as a whole) the overall framework is the literary genre of narrative. (3) The literary imagination images forth its subject matter, and we remember the Confessions primarily as a concrete embodiment of settings, events, and characters, not as an exposition of ideas expressed by means of expository writing. (4) As an extension of the previous point, the ideas are not stated directly (for the most part) but embodied indirectly in such forms as story, meditations, or prayers, with the result that we first need to interact with those forms and then extract the ideas; such indirection is a literary way of proceeding. (5) The literary forms and style continually call attention to themselves instead of pointing directly to a body of information; self-conscious artistry of this type is a defining trait of literature. (6) The subject of literature is universal human experience; despite the autobiographical thread in the Confessions, Augustine handles the facts in such a way that at many points we can see our own experiences—our own longings and failings—in the material.

## Title, Textual History, and Format

Over the centuries, covers and title pages of Augustine's *Confessions* offer the following options for the title: (1) Augustine's *Confessions*; (2) The *Confessions*; (3) *The Confessions*; (4) *Confessions*. Augustine originally entitled his book *Confessions in Thirteen Books*. But it seems abrupt not to include the article "the" in front of the word "Confessions." The word "the" should not be italicized and capitalized, however, because it is not a part of the original, designated title.

What is a confession? A second thing that we need to decipher about the title is what Augustine means by the word "confessions." Two meanings are in view. First, Augustine spends much of the book confessing the sins of the mind and body that he committed throughout his life. Second, in Augustine's day (and in Christian circles to this day), to confess meant to declare one's religious beliefs (a profession of faith). Thus we refer to historic creeds of Christendom as confessions (e.g., the Belgic Confession or the Westminster Confession of Faith). We can even find this usage in the Bible, as in 1 Timothy 3:16—"Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness" (ESV), and then a brief creed in poetic form is quoted.

**Singular or plural?** Should the book be referred to in the singular or the plural? Scholars and publishers do not agree on the answer to that question. Even though the word *Confessions* is plural, the practice adopted in this guide is to refer to it in the singular, on the ground that the word *Confessions* refers to the book as an entity, not to the plurality of the confessions that Augustine makes in the book.

**Composition and transmission.** Augustine composed the *Confessions* by hand. The printing press would not be invented until more than a thousand years later. This means that initially the book was circulated in handwritten manuscript versions. But the dissemination of the book did not depend solely on handwritten manuscripts; the *Confessions* was also read and recited orally in group settings for ten centuries. Composition can be assumed to be what it was for the apostle Paul: oral dictation to an expert in writing shorthand; expansion of the shorthand version into a complete version; multiple transcriptions made by a team of scribes as the original manuscript was read aloud.

**Format.** The earliest manuscript versions of the *Confessions* divided the material into thirteen books. When the book was first printed in the late fifteenth century, editors divided each book into numbered units, and eventually some editors and commentators called these units chapters. Then later yet (in 1679), paragraph numbers were added for each book. Most editions use chapter numbers, and some (but not all) use paragraph numbering as well. Editors often supply their own titles for the thirteen books, and the author of this study guide has followed that practice.

#### Translations and Editions

The *Confessions* is available in numerous translations and editions. While many of these are good, it is important to choose from among them with an awareness of the options. Additionally, some editions have features that a Christian reader would find useful. In this regard, the preferable translation and edition is by Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991, 2008). Its great advantage is that it prints the Bible references in parentheses right in the text instead of in footnotes. A touchstone for all translations is how they render the famous opening of the *Confessions*. Chadwick translates it in the best-known form:

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.

Also, this edition identifies chapter units with Roman numerals and includes paragraph numbers in parentheses. The Chadwick translation has been used in this guide.

The translation by R. S. Pine-Coffin is also widely used (Penguin, 1961). Biblical references appear in footnotes at the bottom of pages—useful, but not as convenient as the Chadwick edition. Pine-Coffin definitely makes the grade stylistically, as seen in the opening passage: "Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty? . . . The thought of you stirs him [man] so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."

Many scholars today use Maria Boulding's translation (Vintage, 1997). It prints the Bible references as footnotes. Stylistically, Boulding is like a dynamic-equivalent Bible: the translation is clear but lacks the stylistic excellence of many other translations. Here is how Boulding translates the touchstone opening passage: "Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise. . . . You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you." That does not have the familiar aphoristic flair, and it is wordy (the author of the prefatory "chronology" in this edition quotes Augustine's famous opening aphorism from the Chadwick translation rather than the Boulding translation!). The primary problem with a dynamic-equivalent or free translation such as Boulding's is that it is a hybrid—a translation plus an overlay of commentary; we can never be confident that we are reading what the author actually wrote.

An old standby is Rex Warner's translation (New American Library, 1963). Warner translates the touchstone passage thus: "Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised..... You stimulate him to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you." Warner does not supply biblical references.

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# CHRISTIAN GUIDES TO THE CLASSICS BY LELAND RYKEN

Encounter the classics of Western literature with literary expert Leland Ryken and learn to evaluate the text from a Christian worldview.

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS



HAWTHORNE'S
SCARLET LETTER



HOMER'S
THE ODYSSEY



MILTON'S
PARADISE LOST



SHAKESPEARE'S
HAMLET



SHAKESPEARE'S MACBETH

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WE'VE ALL HEARD ABOUT THE CLASSICS and assume they're great. Some of us have even read them on our own. But for those of us who remain a bit intimidated or simply want to get more out of our reading, Crossway's Christian Guides to the Classics are here to help.

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