

Study Guide on Augustine's *Confessions* (Part I: Books I – IX)

Explain the title of the work. Why is it called *Confessions*?

- What and to whom is Augustine confessing? Consider the following passages:
 - “. . . I do not blush, Lord God, to confess your mercies to me and to call upon you” (71¹).
 - “To him my soul is making confession, and ‘he is healing it, because it was against him that it sinned’ (Psalms 4:3)” (64).
- What is the purpose of these confessions? Consider these passages:
 - “I will love you, Lord, and I will give thanks and confession to your name because you have forgiven me such great evils and my nefarious deeds” (32).
 - “But I shall nevertheless confess to you my shame, since it is for your praise. Allow me, I pray you, grant me leave to run through my memory, as it is in the present, of the past twisting of my mistaken life and to sacrifice to you a ‘victim of jubilation’” (52).

Why exactly does Augustine steal the pears (Book II)? What is the larger significance of the pear episode? Does his account of the pear episode make sense regarding the willing choice of evil?

What is the nature of Augustine's conversion?

- What milestones lead up to the conversion?
 - How was Augustine affected by reading Cicero? See Cicero's exhortation “not to study one particular sect but to love and seek and pursue and hold fast and strongly embrace wisdom itself, wherever found” (39).
 - What were the effects of Augustine's acquaintance with Faustus? With Ambrose? (See Books V, VI.)
- Does his conversion take place on different levels?
 - What intellectual obstacles prevented Augustine from conceiving of the Christian God? How are these problems resolved? What was the “principal and almost sole cause of [Augustine's] inevitable error” (85)?
 - Describe Augustine's moral obstacles to conversion, and how they are finally removed.

¹ Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



Consider Augustine's narrative in light of this opening passage: "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" (3).

- What kind of "rest" does Augustine have in mind in these words? What does it mean for one's heart to rest in God? Consider "You alone are repose" (110), and the citation of Matt. 11:29 (122).
- Is Augustine's heart at rest by the end of Book IX?

What role does friendship play in Augustine's account of his spiritual journey? What does Augustine think are the perils and the possibilities of friendship?

What is Augustine's view of rhetoric and the liberal arts?

- Rhetoric:
 - Faustus has eloquence without truth (73); relation of rhetoric to truth (78).
 - The effect of Ambrose's eloquence on Augustine (87, 88).
 - The style of Scripture (96).
 - Proclaiming God's Word vs. using one's own words (137).
- Liberal arts:
 - "Moreover, what advantage came to me from the fact that I had by myself read and understood all the books I could get hold of on the arts which they call liberal, at a time when I was the most wicked slave of evil lusts?" (70).
 - "Ignorance of the liberal arts is compatible with holding authentic piety" (79).

How does Augustine's view of the Scriptures change over the course of the narratives? (Consider 94, 96, 136.)

Why does Book IX end with Monica's death and burial, and prayers for her soul? Consider how Monica contributes to Augustine in the order of nature and the order of grace.

Do the first nine books of the *Confessions* give glory to God? If so, how?

- What does Augustine mean by "It is piety to make confession to you" (134).
- In what ways can God's power and goodness be seen in Augustine's conversion?
- Why does Augustine cite Isaiah 46:8, "Return, sinners, to your heart" (63)?
 - "I was seeking for you outside myself, and I failed to find 'the God of my heart' (Ps. 72:26)" (90).
 - Inward perception of God (120–121).
 - "By the Platonic books I was admonished to return into myself" (123).



Study Guide on Augustine's *Confessions* (Part II: Books X – XIII)

What major changes take place in the work with Book X?

- Regarding the subject: "So what profit is there, I ask, when, to human readers, by this book I confess to you who I now am, not what I once was?" (180).
- Is there a change with respect to audience? Consider Chapters 5 and 6, including: "I am making this confession not only before you . . . but also in the ears of believing sons of men, sharers in my joy" (181–2).

Why does Augustine focus on memory in Book X? Consider the first nine books as the effects of the activity of Augustine's memory, this book as a description of the faculty and its cause, and the next three books as a consideration of God, the cause of all things.

- What account does Augustine give of memory?
- How does the discussion of happiness arise (Chapters 29–35)? Consider: "Where I discovered the truth there I found my God, truth itself, which from the time I learnt it, I have not forgotten" (200).
- Why does Augustine search for God in memory?

Why does Book X end the way it does? Consider the necessity of a mediator in the quest to "know oneself," and the fulfillment of that mediation in the Eucharist (220).

"May I hear and understand how in the beginning you made heaven and earth" (223). Is this prayer by Augustine answered in Book XI? What progress does he make towards this understanding?

What is the purpose of Book XI? Consider the following passages:

- "Why then do I set before you an ordered account of so many things? . . . I am stirring up love for you in myself and in those who read this, so that we may all say, 'Great is the Lord and highly worthy to be praised' (Ps. 47:1)" (221).
- "Let me offer you in sacrifice the service of my thinking and my tongue" (222).

What is Augustine's account of time (beginning at 230)? Understand what he means by calling time "extension" (236) and then "distension of mind" (240, 243).

How does the account of time arise, and how does it relate to what has come before in the *Confessions*? What is Augustine attempting to do by discussing time and eternity?

- "You are my eternal Father, but I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand" (244).
- "Who can lay hold on the heart and give it fixity, so that for some moment it may be stable, and for a fraction of time may grasp the splendour of a constant eternity" (228).



Consider Augustine's exegesis of Genesis in the final books.

- Why does he discuss Genesis at all? Why does he not proceed beyond the opening lines?
- What account does Augustine give of "In the beginning God created heaven and earth"? (Consider the "provisional understanding" on 253.)
- Why, for Augustine, are signs and sacraments necessary (263, 289)?

How does Augustine respond to those who reject his interpretation of Genesis (254)? Why does he think that many interpretations are possible (259 ff.)? Does this imply anything about how we should read the *Confessions*? (See 266, 277.)

Is there a deeper unity to Books XI–XIII than the continuing exposition of the opening of Genesis?

Are Books XI–XIII a fitting conclusion to Augustine's *Confessions*? How do these books relate to Book X and the rest of the work? What gives unity to the *Confessions* as a whole?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Augustine's *Confessions*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

