

Augustine's Restless Heart
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History is filled with people testifying to the power of God in their lives, to His grace, and the Spirit of God moving in their lives, as well as the power of scripture in their lives. We're gonna look back today to the late fourth century, and we're gonna start off in northern Africa. Numidia was part of the Roman Empire, and it was a dry, mountainous area. It's now known as Algeria. And even though Christianity had once been an outlaw faith within the ancient Roman Empire, it was now legal. It had been legal for over fifty years when the emperor Constantine came into power.

The story's main character is a young man named Augustine. His mother, Monica, was a devout Christian, but his father, Patricus, was not. He was a follower of the old religions, the pagan faith. Monica tried to bring her son up in the Christian faith, but Augustine later admitted that he did not find the New Testament to his liking. He found it rather simplistic and uncouth, not a book worthy of his time or of his intelligence. Its style lacked the sophistication of ancient literary heroes such as Homer, Cicero, and Virgil. He placed it aside as part of his mother's...his old mother's foolish faith.

As a young man, Augustine had a close friend. This close friend is part of the supporting cast in this story. Historically this friend's name is unknown, but his role as supporting cast member is rather simple—it's the death scene. It comes early in the story. He was a close personal friend who got sick, grew worse, and eventually passes away. This was the year 376; and years later Augustine would look back at this event and he would write, "My heart grew dark with grief, and wherever I looked I saw only death."

This is what set the stage of Augustine's predicament—dissatisfaction with his mother's religion and the death of a friend. Augustine had a restless heart. This would begin a quest, a search for peace and intellectual satisfaction. There would be several stops along the way. One of them would be Manichaeism. It was a new religious movement that was coming out of the East. Its founder was a man named Mani, and he came from the area which is now known as Iran. Manichaeism is described as a conscientious syncretism, which means it grabs bits and pieces from other religions and adheres...brings them all together. When it would come into an area it would look around, and the missionaries would take those bits and pieces from the religions that were in that area, and they would assimilate it. It was dualistic. It held that the spirit was of utmost value and the physical world, the things around us, were not of any value. They were evil. The goal of Manichaeism was to liberate the spirit from the material world.

Augustine became a disciple of this movement. But he became dissatisfied when the teachers were not able to answer his questions. Eventually they would put him off and tell him tell him that 'Wait a little while. There's a traveling teacher who's headed this way. And when he arrives we're sure he'll be able to answer all your questions.' Well, the great teacher did come; he arrived. And when Augustine asked his questions he did not have any better answers. Augustine turned his back on this movement.

He would become a teacher. He would become a teacher of rhetoric. Well, he had to make a living somehow. Rhetoric was public speaking, persuasive speaking, communications. When you turn on the TV and you watch one of those lawyer shows and the trial's going on, it comes down to the final...the jury's about to make the decision, and the defense attorney gets up and he makes an elegant speech that sways the jury to pronounce the defendant 'not guilty'—that's rhetoric. When the politician's speaking to a crowd of people, convinces them to vote a particular way—that's rhetoric. And when a preacher gets behind a pulpit and speaks a powerful sermon there is rhetoric involved. In ancient Roman society rhetoric was no small concern. It was an essential course for success in those days.

At twenty-nine years of age Augustine stepped aboard a boat and headed off to the city of Rome looking for better teaching opportunities. In the city of Milan just north of Rome he set up house. Here he began studying Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism was a spiritual philosophical tradition that emphasized union with God, or union with the One, through mystical contemplation, trances, and ecstasy. He was involved with that movement for quite a while.

His mother, Monica, actually followed him across the ocean. She was a very determined mother...some would say even overbearing. She worried about her son. She went to Ambrose, who was the leading bishop in Milan, and she pleaded with him to go talk to her son. Ambrose considered Augustine unteachable at that time. It was useless, he said. She continued, insisted, pushing, pressuring him. Then she started...broke down in tears, crying. And Ambrose had had enough. He said, 'Go away, and God bless you, for it is not possible for the son of these tears to perish.' Monica took this as a sign and a promise. She continued to pray with tears for her son.

Augustine would go to hear Ambrose speak, but not because he was interested in his faith. He went to hear his method, his style of speaking. Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric. He went to study his method. Ambrose's speaking was eloquent; and furthermore, he was able to take the simple words of scripture and place them in a context that Augustine could appreciate. He forced Augustine to reconsider some of his former conceptions. He was not merely using persuasive words, but there was strong and logical arguments behind what he was saying. Ambrose was making an impression, and Augustine realized that Christianity was more than he realized—that the biblical narrative, the simple biblical narrative, was deeper than he had realized. Christianity, that foolish faith of his mother, was beginning to make sense.

Ever since the death of a close friend ten years earlier Augustine's heart was restless. He had been searching and had come to the point of making a decision, making a commitment. The prayers of a mother, as well as the teaching of people like Ambrose, their stories, were having an impact on him. In the year 386, in a garden in the back of the house where he was staying at, Augustine struggled within himself. Did he have the inner strength to live as he knew he should? It appeared that so many simpler folks had no problem with it. Yet he knew there was something inside of himself that was controlling him. It was as if the Apostle Paul were again crying out, "*When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin.* [Romans 7:21-23]" He was struggling. It's part of the human predicament being played out across time and space. Augustine was in despair. He didn't have the strength; he didn't have the will power to turn himself wholly over to God. His restless heart was a symptom of a deeper problem—his own defiance.

He sat in a garden where he was living, struggling within himself. He then heard a voice. Some will say that was the voice of an angel. Others will say the voice of a small child either singing a song or quoting a nursery rhyme, and the words were simple—"Take up and read. Take up and read." And Augustine picked up the copy of Paul's epistles that were lying on the bench next to him, and he read "*Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy, but put on the LORD Jesus Christ.*" 'Put on the LORD Jesus Christ.' It sounds like just putting on a jacket, but those words made an impact on him. He felt them inside of himself. He later would look back at this time, remembering this moment, and he would write, "The light of salvation had been poured into my heart." He felt the impact, he felt the change, he felt the grace. Things would never be the same after this. His restless heart found rest. When writing of his life story, Augustine would summarize it with these words; speaking to God he would say, "For Thou, O LORD, hast formed us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

Augustine's restless heart found rest, but it did not stagnate. Augustine's story doesn't end here in the back garden scene. I found it; he doesn't kick up his heels and retire. This is where it begins. God puts him to work. He traveled back across the sea to northern Africa. And while he was passing through the city of Hippo he attended the church there. He had intended just to quietly move on back to his hometown. But when the people realized he was there they were excited, because they needed a new minister in their church. And he was elected against his will to stay in the church in Hippo and minister there. He had wanted to live a contemplative life, a life of reading, writing and philosophy. But it was not gonna be God's plans for his life. He ended up dealing with the daily affairs, the debates, the controversies, and the catastrophes that were going to happen.

Besides the daily affairs, he preached not just once a week; he preached on a daily basis. He instructed many...many of the workers in the church, and many of the people around. He picked up his pen and he wrote. Actually, he had scribes; he had a room full of scribes that he would dictate to, and that way he could make many copies of the same book as he was speaking. It has been stated that Augustine wrote more books in his life than many people will read in their own lives. Having been on the inside of the Manichaeist religion, he understood it and wrote warning people of its inconsistencies and its falsehood. He wrote on just about any topic that could affect or have any impact on the Christian faith on almost any imaginable subject. Looking back over his earlier years and his searching of his restless heart, he produced what historians called the first true autobiography. He entitled it the "Confessions." Not only is it a monumental work in the history of western literature, but it is still considered a classic of Christian spirituality.

This is an age of controversy in the church's history, and Augustine had to deal with many of the controversies as they came up. The Donatist controversy was one that threatened to split the entire...all the churches in northern Africa. This controversy actually has its roots long before Augustine was even born, back in the days of persecutions when the Roman officials were arresting people. Several of the ministers back then, under pressure by the authorities, would hand over copies of the scriptures to them, or they would go into hiding. This was considered traitors...they were considered traitors. And years later, even though Christianity was now legal, many people still held grudges and would not forgive the past offences of these traitor ministers. They wanted them thrown out of the church. Not only that, but they wanted anybody associated with them thrown out of the church as well. That was one of the controversies that was splitting the church. Augustine got involved in it. It was still going on, and he took up the challenge, and he brought the Christian people back together and unified them once more.

Catastrophes... In the year 410, far across the Mediterranean Sea, the city of Rome was sacked. The western Goths, a Germanic people, had succeeded in penetrating the defenses of the city. They laid siege to Rome three times; and on the third time they took the city. For three days they sacked, looted, and burned the city of Rome. Many of the citizens of Rome packed their bags, sold what they could, and abandoned what they couldn't. They left, heading across the Mediterranean Sea to find new lives.

The city of Hippo was flooded with refugees. Augustine responded in three ways. The first way was how to assist the refugees. They had no homes, they lacked food, they lacked clothing. He put together shelters, and got his congregation together so that they could minister to them. Secondly, he needed to minister to his own congregation. Fear was spreading throughout the cities of the Empire. After all, even Jerome—one of the leading biblical scholars of the day, far off in Bethlehem—raised the concern: if Rome could perish, then who of us can be safe? It was a period and time of fear. And also the sacking of Rome was used by pagan philosophers and other critics of the Christian faith; and they argued 'the reason this happened is because we had abandoned the old religions, the old pagan faiths of the past. It's these Christians that caused this catastrophe.' Augustine countered this attack with a massive work entitled "The City of God." It's over fifteen hundred (1,500) pages long. In it he not only defended the Christian faith from the pagan criticism, but he placed all of history in a perspective of God's purpose.

Augustine left a legacy and an impact. If you want to study theology you will find you will have to deal with Augustine's writings. He is viewed by many as the foremost theologian of the western world. Some have even gone so far as to state that every theologian since him has been a postscript to him. If you study philosophy, he is there. If you study literature, he is there. He wrote the first autobiography. If you investigate spirituality, he's there. Study history—well, he wrote the first philosophy of history. From personal spirituality to environmental issues, politics and education, you will cross the name of Augustine. How about music? Classic rock? Modern folk? In the 1960s Bob Dillon wrote a song with the words, "I dreamed I saw Saint Augustine alive with fiery breath." And if that's not enough, drive down to Homer, go fishing; drive down to Homer, and as you're turning that last hill, that deep hill down to Homer, don't look at the Spit. If it's a clear day look to the right and you will see a mountain with fiery breath—volcano St. Augustine.

What I love is the way he summarizes his own journey. In the beginning of his autobiography, the "Confessions," he writes "For Thou, LORD, hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." Restless, yes; static, no. See the story, see the grace. He searched the stories in scripture and saw the grace of God there. Then he looked through his own life and saw the grace of God there. When he wrote that statement, "...our hearts are restless 'til they find rest in Thee," he included the reader. Our hearts—not his heart, not my heart—our hearts are restless 'til they rest in Thee.

After high school I left home; got into a Volkswagen and I headed for Alaska. I asked myself at that time why am I a Christian? And my answer came up—simple, because Mom and Dad were Christians. And that answer didn't satisfy me. It's not uncommon for kids growing up in a Christian home to question their faith upon leaving home. And I understand what a restless heart is. During this time I wasn't opposed to Christianity; it just wasn't my faith—it was my parents' faith.

I began searching. This wasn't something many people would have noticed. A restless heart is not a bad thing. For Augustine, it drove him to dig deeper. It actually was used by God to lead him to God. The problem is the restless heart can be covered up by many things. Some people become workaholics; others abuse drugs and alcohol; some work hard for fame and prestige. They do anything to cover up a restless heart, hoping that it will go away. But it doesn't, and it shouldn't. I think Augustine would have agreed with the ancient philosopher who wrote that the unexamined life is not worth living.

I came across the writings of an eighteenth century historian philosopher, David Hume. He impressed me immensely. He was an empiricist and a skeptic. One of the quotes that hit me was when he wrote that it would take a miracle for a rational man to believe in miracles.

I wandered on, reading, taking opportunities to spend time in the mountains and on rivers. I enjoyed spending days alone in the mountains, watching the eagles below me. Then I wandered across the nineteenth century Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, a man whose experience of nature was limited to carriage rides along country roads. What I discovered in Kierkegaard was not so much answers, but somebody who understood the situation. And he described it as floating in seventy thousand (70,000) fathoms of water, helplessly floating in the ocean, no foundation, no footholds, nothing underneath. Kierkegaard understood the situation, and I also believe he understood grace.

Somewhere, by a lake in the Kenai Peninsula, I was homeless by choice. It was not quite a garden, but it did have a picnic table. Of all the books that I was reading, I was reading the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes with the paralyzing words "*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, meaningless and chasing after the wind.*" "Everything I do," I thought to myself, "I do for myself, and that's why it's vanity. Everything I do is temporary. That's why it becomes meaningless." That is the message that is rocketed through the book of Ecclesiastes. "I live for the temporal self. I live for myself. My life cannot be meaningful." Then near the end of the book the author adds, "*Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.*"

This temporal self sat on the picnic table thinking, "yeah, whatever." Remember the Creator, yet everything is meaningless because everything is temporary and selfish. And then it flipped...it flipped inside my head—replace the temporal self with the eternal Other. Remember the Creator. And I do feel like I heard God laughing at me that day. Careers, jobs, our homes and families, the bank account, credit scores, rivers and mountains, fishing and gardening, politics—all these things have purpose and meaning when placed in relation to the eternal Other, when placed in relation to the Creator.

Augustine wrote, "For Thou, God, hast formed us for Thyself." And if we are not in God, close to our Creator, then our hearts will be restless. They should be. They'll be like a stray dog wandering through the streets at night. Our hearts are restless; they should be until we have our place in our Creator.

I believe Joel will come up and close us, because...with a final prayer, because he knows all the words.

Joel: Would you stand and... It is our desire, as we go from here, that we do what John did this morning and give witness to the reality of Jesus Christ in our lives. So let's close in prayer.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go enjoy His grace.