GREAT CHRISTIAN CLASSICS

Volume 1

Five Remarkable Narratives of the Faith

EDITED BY

Kevin Swanson & Joshua Schwisow





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Introduction

You hold in your hands a singular compilation of the most remarkable life narratives ever recorded in the history of the Christian Church. For the first time, these outstanding autobiographical records are combined to form one powerful manual. It is the eye-witness account, or better, the heart-witness account of the work of the Spirit of God in the life of men in the New Testament era. It is the story of the siege of the city of Mansoul (to use Bunyan's analogy). Far more important than the historical narratives found in the city of man as it builds its proud empires, these narratives detail the powerful workings of the Spirit of God in the hearts of men.

The stories herein chronicle the building of another kingdom—a somewhat ignominious city in the eyes of the world around us. For what the world perceives as great accomplishments, based on its metrics of power and wealth, has little to do with the kingdom of God. This explains why such literature is largely ignored by the public and private schools in our day which have been commissioned to provide our children's education. We will refer to this material as *Christian classics*, as it is intended especially for those *Christians* who are profoundly impressed with the building of the kingdom of God and the Church of Jesus Christ through the centuries.

These narratives are true, real-life stories that recount the real battles against sin and evil, waged and won. Far more important than those battles fought by the world's great military leaders and statesmen, here are the men who overcame the world, by faith. For the greatest battles are those fought against the greatest enemies of the human soul—the world, the flesh, and the Devil. They are waged with the deadly weapons of the Word of God and steadfast faith in that Word.

Some stories are still read 1,000 years after they were written. But these stories will stand for eternity. They have already stood the test of time. Christian people everywhere

have read these stories in every generation since they were first penned. But even more importantly, the men who tell their stories are great men and they will stand in God's hall of faith for eternity. They are men who worked hard to raise up a kingdom out of the dust of heathendom, paganism, statism, humanism, and ecclesiastical compromise and decay. All of them worked in the face of unbelievable dangers, including persecution, imprisonment, enslavement, and the devastation of war. Truly, these are the patriarchs and the pioneers in the faith. They built the Church from the bottom-up in places as far-flung as Africa, Ireland, Scotland, England, and the South Pacific.

Speaking as a father who has spent a lifetime seeking out the best literature for his children's education, aside from the Bible, I have never found a book or series of books as spiritually or intellectually edifying as the collection of narratives you are about to read in this compendium. These writings constitute rare, intimate, and transparent personal narratives concerning the work of the living God in the lives of some of the greatest Christian men in history. To witness in vivid, living colors the work of God in a man's life is to understand it better in our own lives!

If you want to raise up Christians in your home, there is nothing better than to put them at the feet of Christians. Disciples take on the thought and life patterns of those who disciple them (Luke 6:40), and when children read, they sit at the feet of the teachers who write the books. What better thing to do than to set them at the feet of the greatest Christians who have ever written anything? Too many Christian children sit at the feet of humanists in their high school and college literature classes while they have little or no knowledge of the deep truths of Scripture and the great Christian writings produced throughout history.

I pray God's blessings on all those that take up these powerful, impacting books; that God would first prepare their hearts to receive them, to comprehend them, and then to live them out for His glory! Amen.

A Father and Pastor,

Kevin Swanson

November, 2016 A.D.

THE CONFESSIONS OF AUGUSTINE

Augustine of Hippo AD 401

translated by Albert C. Outler (Abridged)

An Introduction to the Testimony of Augustine

o one influenced Christianity during the first one thousand years of the Church as profoundly as Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, in North Africa. Should one survey all of the sources favorably quoted by the Protestant reformers, he would find Augustine preeminent in the list. Indeed, to properly understand the development of the Christian faith and its impact on North Africa, Europe, and America, one must carefully consider the writings of this man.

Augustine was the son of a pagan father and a Christian mother, a scholar of the first order, and a teacher of rhetoric in the Roman schools. He experimented with various forms of unbelief, including the Manichean religion (a Gnostic cult that was active throughout the 4th and 5th centuries). He later converted to Christianity, thanks in part to his mother's relentless prayers and the faithful discipleship of Ambrose, the bishop (or pastor) of Milan, Italy.

His powerful intellect and penetrating discernment concerning human thought and action, combined with a self-abasing humility and deep piety, produced an outstanding orthodox Christian system of thought which has served to build the Church of Christ through the ages.

Hardly any other Christian author has so effectively captured the Pauline themes of man's depravity and God's grace.

This is beautifully communicated in the words of his own testimony, recorded in these Confessions as a prayer to God.

Unfortunately, too many Christians today think of Church history as the past ten years of the gathering of their local church, or the last one hundred years since their present denomination was organized. This narrow view of history denies the work of the Spirit of God over 1,900 years of Church history, and it betrays both a pride and an ignorance that, given enough time, is sure to land many in deviant cults and heresies. To read the work of Christians from the past is to consider the battles that they fought, the enemies they confronted, and the mistakes they made. We stand on their shoulders. From that viewpoint, we may not exactly replicate everything that they did but we respect their legacy, learn from their mistakes, and improve on what they have given us. Rejecting the Church fathers, imperfect as they may have been, is tantamount to cutting ourselves off at the knees and re-inventing the faith with each new generation.

One will not find a great deal of theology in this portion of Augustine's writings. *Confessions* serve more as a testimony, a godly example in humility, a self-analysis, and an apologetic for the Christian faith. In this study the autobiographical components of Augustine's great testimony are covered, which are particularly suited for this study of great Christian narratives.

ã BOOKI

reat art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy power, and infinite is thy wisdom." And man desires to praise thee, for he is a part of thy creation; he bears his mortality about with him and carries the evidence of his sin and the proof that thou dost resist the proud. Still he desires to praise thee, this man who is only a small part of thy creation. Thou hast prompted him, that he should delight to praise thee, for thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee. Grant me, O Lord, to know and understand whether first to invoke thee or to praise thee; whether first to know thee or call upon thee. But who can invoke thee, knowing thee not? For he who knows thee not may invoke thee as another than thou art. It may be that we should invoke thee in order that we may come to know thee. But "how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? Or how shall they believe without a preacher?" Now, "they shall praise the Lord who seek him," for "those who seek shall find him," and, finding him, shall praise him. I will seek thee, O Lord, and call upon thee. I call upon thee, O Lord, in my faith which thou hast given me, which thou hast inspired in me through the humanity of thy Son, and through the ministry of thy preacher.¹

And how shall I call upon my God—my God and my Lord? For when I call on him I ask him to come into me. And

1. The preacher that helped to bring Augustine to faith is his pastor in Milan, a man named Ambrose.

what place is there in me into which my God can come? How could God, the God who made both heaven and earth, come into me? Is there anything in me, O Lord my God, that can contain thee? Do even the heaven and the earth, which thou hast made, and in which thou didst make me, contain thee? Is it possible that, since without thee nothing would be which does exist, thou didst make it so that whatever exists has some capacity to receive thee? Why, then, do I ask thee to come into me, since I also am and could not be if thou wert not in me? For I am not, after all, in hell—and yet thou art there too, for "if I go down into hell, thou art there." Therefore I would not exist—I would simply not be at all—unless I exist in thee, from whom and by whom and in whom all things are. Even so, Lord; even so. Where do I call thee to, when I am already in thee? Or from whence wouldst thou come into me? Where, beyond heaven and earth, could I go that there my God might come to me—he who hath said, "I fill heaven and earth?"

Since, then, thou dost fill the heaven and earth, do they contain thee? Or, dost thou fill and overflow them, because they cannot contain thee? And where dost thou pour out what remains of thee after heaven and earth are full? Or, indeed, is there no need that thou, who dost contain all things, shouldst be contained by any, since those things which thou dost fill thou fillest by containing them? For the vessels which thou dost fill do not confine thee, since even if they were broken, thou wouldst not be poured out. And, when thou art poured out on us, thou art not thereby brought down; rather, we are uplifted. Thou art not scattered; rather, thou dost gather us together. But when thou dost fill all things, dost thou fill them with thy whole being? Or, since not even all things together could contain thee altogether, does any one thing contain a single part, and do all things contain that same part at the same time? Do singulars contain thee singly? Do greater things contain more of thee, and smaller things less? Or, is it not rather that thou art wholly present everywhere, yet in such a way that nothing contains thee wholly?

What, therefore, is my God? What, I ask, but the Lord God? "For who is Lord but the Lord himself, or who is God besides our God?" Most high, most excellent, most potent, most omnipotent; most merciful and most just; most secret and most truly present; most beautiful and most strong; stable, yet not supported; unchangeable, yet changing all things; never new, never old; making all things new, yet bringing old age upon the proud, and they know it not; always working, ever at rest; gathering, yet needing nothing; sustaining, pervading, and protecting; creating, nourishing, and developing; seeking, and yet possessing all things. Thou dost love, but without passion; art jealous, yet free from care; dost repent without remorse; art angry, yet remainest serene. Thou changest thy ways, leaving thy plans unchanged; thou recoverest what thou hast never really lost. Thou art never in need but still thou dost rejoice at thy gains; art never greedy, yet demandest dividends. Men pay more than is required so that thou dost become a debtor; yet who can possess anything at all which is not already thine? Thou owest men nothing, yet payest out to them as if in debt to thy creature, and when thou dost cancel debts thou losest nothing thereby. Yet, O my God, my life, my holy Joy, what is this that I have said? What can any man say when he speaks of thee? But woe to them that keep silence—since even those who say most are dumb.

Who shall bring me to rest in thee? Who will send thee into my heart so to overwhelm it that my sins shall be blotted out and I may embrace thee, my only good? What art thou to me? Have mercy that I may speak. What am I to thee that thou shouldst command me to love thee, and if I do it not, art angry and threatenest vast misery? Is it, then, a trifling sorrow not to love thee? It is not so to me. Tell me, by thy mercy, O Lord, my God, what thou art to me. "Say to my soul, I am your salvation." So speak that I may hear. Behold, the ears of my heart are before thee, O Lord; open them and "say to my soul, I am your salvation." I will hasten after that voice, and I will

2. Augustine is sensitive to his sinful condition, yet still confident that God has forgiven him and "put away his iniquity."

lay hold upon thee. Hide not thy face from me. Even if I die, let me see thy face lest I die.²

The house of my soul is too narrow for thee to come in to me; let it be enlarged by thee. It is in ruins; do thou restore it. There is much about it which must offend thy eyes; I confess and know it. But who will cleanse it? Or, to whom shall I cry but to thee? "Cleanse thou me from my secret faults," O Lord, "and keep back thy servant from strange sins." "I believe, and therefore do I speak." But thou, O Lord, thou knowest. Have I not confessed my transgressions unto thee, O my God; and hast thou not put away the iniquity of my heart? I do not contend in judgment with thee, who art truth itself; and I would not deceive myself, lest my iniquity lie even to itself. I do not, therefore, contend in judgment with thee, for "if thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?"

Still, dust and ashes as I am, allow me to speak before thy mercy. Allow me to speak, for, behold, it is to thy mercy that I speak and not to a man who scorns me. Yet perhaps even thou mightest scorn me; but when thou dost turn and attend to me, thou wilt have mercy upon me. For what do I wish to say, O Lord my God, but that I know not whence I came hither into this life-in-death. Or should I call it death-in-life? I do not know. And yet the consolations of thy mercy have sustained me from the very beginning, as I have heard from my fleshly parents, from whom and in whom thou didst form me in time—for I cannot myself remember. Thus even though they sustained me by the consolation of woman's milk, neither my mother nor my nurses filled their own breasts but thou, through them, didst give me the food of infancy according to thy ordinance and thy bounty which underlie all things. For it was thou who didst cause me not to want more than thou gavest and it was thou who gavest to those who nourished me the will to give me what thou didst give them. And they, by an instinctive affection, were willing to give me what thou hadst supplied abundantly. It was, indeed, good for them that my good should come through them, though, in truth, it was not

from them but by them. For it is from thee, O God, that all good things come—and from my God is all my health. This is what I have since learned, as thou hast made it abundantly clear by all that I have seen thee give, both to me and to those around me. For even at the very first I knew how to suck, to lie quiet when I was full, and to cry when in pain—nothing more.

Afterward I began to laugh—at first in my sleep, then when waking. For this I have been told about myself and I believe it—though I cannot remember it—for I see the same things in other infants. Then, little by little, I realized where I was and wished to tell my wishes to those who might satisfy them, but I could not! For my wants were inside me, and they were outside, and they could not by any power of theirs come into my soul. And so I would fling my arms and legs about and cry, making the few and feeble gestures that I could, though indeed the signs were not much like what I inwardly desired and when I was not satisfied—either from not being understood or because what I got was not good for me—I grew indignant that my elders were not subject to me and that those on whom I actually had no claim did not wait on me as slaves—and I avenged myself on them by crying. That infants are like this, I have myself been able to learn by watching them; and they, though they knew me not, have shown me better what I was like than my own nurses who knew me.

And, behold, my infancy died long ago, but I am still living. But thou, O Lord, whose life is forever and in whom nothing dies—since before the world was, indeed, before all that can be called "before," thou wast, and thou art the God and Lord of all thy creatures; and with thee abide all the stable causes of all unstable things, the unchanging sources of all changeable things, and the eternal reasons of all non-rational and temporal things—tell me, thy suppliant, O God, tell me, O merciful One, in pity tell a pitiful creature whether my infancy followed yet an earlier age of my life that had already passed away before it. Was it such another age which I spent in my mother's womb? For something of that sort has been

suggested to me, and I have myself seen pregnant women. But what, O God, my Joy, preceded that period of life? Was I, indeed, anywhere, or anybody? No one can explain these things to me, neither father nor mother, nor the experience of others, nor my own memory. Dost thou laugh at me for asking such things? Or dost thou command me to praise and confess unto thee only what I know?

I give thanks to thee, O Lord of heaven and earth, giving praise to thee for that first being and my infancy of which I have no memory. For thou hast granted to man that he should come to self-knowledge through the knowledge of others, and that he should believe many things about himself on the authority of the womenfolk. Now, clearly, I had life and being; and, as my infancy closed, I was already learning signs by which my feelings could be communicated to others.³

Whence could such a creature come but from thee, O Lord? Is any man skillful enough to have fashioned himself? Or is there any other source from which being and life could flow into us, save this, that thou, O Lord, hast made us—thou with whom being and life are one, since thou thyself art supreme being and supreme life both together.

For thou art infinite and in thee there is no change, nor an end to this present day—although there is a sense in which it ends in thee since all things are in thee and there would be no such thing as days passing away unless thou didst sustain them. And since "thy years shall have no end, "thy years are an ever-present day." And how many of ours and our fathers' days have passed through this thy day and have received from it what measure and fashion of being they had? And all the days to come shall so receive and so pass away. "But thou art the same" And all the things of tomorrow and the days yet to come, and all of yesterday and the days that are past, thou wilt gather into this thy day. What is it to me if someone does not understand this? Let him still rejoice and continue to ask, "What is this?" Let him also rejoice and prefer to seek thee,

3. Augustine speaks of the ever-present day for God, in which there is no before or after with God. He also speaks of the doctrine of original sin, in that every infant is born in bondage to sin.

even if he fails to find an answer, rather than to seek an answer and not find thee!

"Hear me, O God! Woe to the sins of men!" When a man cries thus, thou showest him mercy, for thou didst create the man but not the sin in him. Who brings to remembrance the sins of my infancy? For in thy sight there is none free from sin, not even the infant who has lived but a day upon this earth. Who brings this to my remembrance? Does not each little one, in whom I now observe what I no longer remember of myself? In what ways, in that time, did I sin? Was it that I cried for the breast? If I should now so cry—not indeed for the breast, but for food suitable to my condition—I should be most justly laughed at and rebuked. What I did then deserved rebuke but, since I could not understand those who rebuked me, neither custom nor common sense permitted me to be rebuked. As we grow we root out and cast away from us such childish habits. Yet I have not seen anyone who is wise who cast away the good when trying to purge the bad. Nor was it good, even in that time, to strive to get by crying what, if it had been given me, would have been hurtful; or to be bitterly indignant at those who, because they were older—not slaves, either, but free—and wiser than I, would not indulge my capricious desires. Was it a good thing for me to try, by struggling as hard as I could, to harm them for not obeying me, even when it would have done me harm to have been obeyed? Thus, the infant's innocence lies in the weakness of his body and not in the infant mind. I have myself observed a baby to be jealous, though it could not speak; it was livid as it watched another infant at the breast.

Who is ignorant of this? Mothers and nurses tell us that they cure these things by I know not what remedies. But is this innocence, when the fountain of milk is flowing fresh and abundant, that another who needs it should not be allowed to share it, even though he requires such nourishment to sustain his life? Yet we look leniently on such things, not because they are not faults, or even small faults, but because they will vanish

4. The sins of infants include jealousy and anger, sins which Augustine believes originate in the mind.